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Learning into a Statewide System of Support: New York State's Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2001, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) implemented a regional approach to supporting improvement efforts in districts and schools identified for improvement through its accountability system. This approach, named the Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement, strategically leverages the resources and expertise of multiple state-funded networks towards the goals of reducing the achievement gap and improving student achievement. The Regional Network Strategy also serves as New York's statewide system of support as required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

One of the premises of the Regional Network Strategy is that a regional and localized approach to school improvement is a more efficient and effective means to provide services to local districts and schools in a state as large, diverse, and complex as New York. In developing a regional strategy, the state called upon a number of state-funded networks to work together, and in some cases to form new partnerships and co-develop approaches to working together in shared schools. Another premise is that the strategy requires a complex, adaptive problem-solving approach that can best be tackled through creating of a statewide learning community.

This report is based on a three-year study of the design of New York's Regional Network Strategy and subsequent implementation actions, including the development of statewide professional development for members of the networks involved in the state's strategy.

The purpose of this study was to gather information on the development of the Regional Network Strategy, including how the regional network partners (e.g. NYSED-funded networks) currently work together, and to use this information to inform and promote the ongoing implementation and refinement of the strategy.

To understand the current status of the regional network partners, we analyzed (1) the specific strategies that regional network partners and NYSED used to support district and school improvement efforts; (2) the assumptions and rationale guiding the use of strategies and approaches across regional network partners; (3) the differing roles and leadership strategies used by different elements of the system; and (4) how network partners and NYSED implemented and/or adapted elements of the overall Regional Network Strategy.

Our study is based on the idea that internal coherence—*alignment and shared understanding of school improvement processes/approaches within and across levels of the multi-tiered educational system*—will lead to a more effective school support system. An effective school support system is one that improves the capacity of districts and schools to effectively implement research-based strategies and supports in schools and classrooms. Two overarching questions guided our study and interaction with New York:

- What is the extent of internal coherence within each level of the system?
- What is the extent of coherence and alignment between levels of the systems?

Overview of Regional Network Strategy

New York State's Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement uses existing regional networks and resources rather than state-level intervention as the primary method of school improvement. In order to provide and coordinate regional services, the state competitively funds seven Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs) across the state, with one RSSC in New York City and the remaining six responsible for different geographic regions outside New York City.

The RSSCs have primary responsibility for providing technical assistance and support to districts and schools identified for improvement. Within their regions, RSSCs assist with required school and district planning, provide job-

embedded professional development to build instructional and organizational capacity, and serve as buffers and translators of state and federal policy. Additionally, RSSCs are responsible for coordinating the services and supports of other organizations and networks that provide assistance in identified districts and schools.

New York developed the Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement as a means of leveraging and refocusing existing resources (e.g., existing networks) so that identified low-performing schools receive customized and coordinated support. The regional approach to school improvement reflects an intentional mix of, and appreciation for, externally driven approaches to school improvement promoted by NCLB (e.g., planning, monitoring, and state intervention) and locally developed approaches; however, balancing these different approaches to change presented a number of challenges that had to be addressed if the strategy was to have the potential to be effective in supporting identified schools.

New York's leaders recognized that systemic change is almost always difficult, as it requires that individuals revisit their core values and beliefs, reflect upon how they work with each other and with districts and schools, and reconsider their role and relationships to others. New York's implementation of the Regional Network Strategy provided an opportunity for state officials and regional network partners to strengthen existing relationships and to reconsider how they work together to build capacity in low-performing districts and schools.

The state Office of School Improvement (OSI), responsible for the implementation of the strategy, recognized early on that policy decisions and mandates were necessary but would not be sufficient to engage and obtain the full support of all of the regional network partners. In March 2004, NYSED initiated a set of quarterly Professional Development sessions, named the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative, as a means of engaging the regional partners in the development of the statewide learning community.

Implementation of the Regional Network Strategy

The original design of the Regional Network Strategy explicitly recognized and valued the role of field-based and regional organizations and individuals. However, the decision to have the networks partner and work together within regions was made with minimal input from District Superintendents or network leaders. So although the original design of the Regional Network Strategy held the potential to recognize and access the expertise and knowledge of those working directly with districts and schools, it did not provide a mechanism for individuals to engage in dialogue with their colleagues so that they could develop a shared understanding of what they were being asked to implement.

Recognizing that the implementation of the strategy would result in necessary shifts in roles and responsibilities among state officials and within the regional networks, the OSI decided to involve staff of relevant state-funded networks (e.g., the regional network partners) and state-level offices (Special Education, OSI and the Office of Bilingual Education) in ongoing professional development and the creation of a statewide learning community.

The central goal of the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative, as it is named, is to create a statewide learning community through which participants would develop a common understanding of the responsibilities of each of the network partners and related NYSED offices. Held on a quarterly basis, the two-day professional development sessions also provided a forum for the networks to begin to develop coordinated regional strategies for their joint support efforts in schools identified as low performing.

During the professional development sessions, the various groups engage in content- and process-oriented activities focused on the session's theme; the sessions are designed to bring cross-network and cross-regional participants together to promote interaction and productive dialogue. Sessions have focused on

issues such as Capacity Building, Diversity, Coherence, Leadership, and Systems Thinking. By focusing on key overarching concepts and structuring the professional development sessions to support dialogue, New York provides a forum to reduce professional isolation and support the kinds of cross-role and cross-level learning and interaction needed to best support low-performing schools.

Participants in the professional development sessions initially experienced high levels of discomfort, stemming in part from having to reflect on their roles and their relation to partner networks. After participating in a total of five professional development sessions, OSI Managers, staff and network representatives have changed how they relate to and work with each other. State officials have begun to relinquish their role as the “expert” and increasingly engage in peer-based discussions about how to best support low-performing schools. Network representatives increased their understanding of each other’s roles as well as increased collaboration with partner networks.

The NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative is continuing, focusing on the development of statewide protocols to guide regional work and, ultimately, to provide a set of common principles and proven strategies to be used to support improvement in identified schools.

Internal Coherence of the System

The central research component of our study involved structured group and individual interviews with leaders and staff from four of the regional networks, the District Superintendents, and the OSI.

Based on our analysis, we identified cross-group themes that relate to and characterize the overall coherence of the Regional Network Strategy. We identified a set of six *Integrative themes*—characteristics of the system that support and enhance coherence. We also identified a set of eight *Interfering*

Network Partners Involved in the Study

- Regional School Support Centers (RSSC)
- Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC)
- Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC) and other Special Education Services
- Student Support Services (SSSN)
- Six District Superintendents

themes—characteristics that, if unrecognized or unaddressed, tend to limit or reduce coherence.

Our analysis of the evidence suggests that New York’s Regional Network Strategy currently does not display the characteristics of a fully coherent system of support, as the alignment is incomplete and there is incomplete evidence of shared understanding of school improvement processes/approaches within and across levels of the system. The integrative themes can be thought of as characteristics of the system to be enhanced and built upon in order to foster internal coherence. The interfering themes are issues that need to be addressed for the Regional Network Strategy to be successful.

The use of the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative, as well as other mechanisms, are ways in which the state can foster those themes that have an integrative function while minimizing the potential negative influence of interfering themes.

Interfering Themes

Different identification criteria. Different criteria are used to identify schools and districts with which to work. As a result, there is an overall lack of clarity among the regional network partners as to the set of schools that are to be supported through the regional network strategy. This confusion has implications for how the regional network partners work together, as well as for the development and use of statewide protocols for school improvement.

Different assumptions about change. Regional network partners hold slightly different but evolving assumptions about the most effective methods for promoting change and improvement

in districts and schools. The state-level parent departments for the regional partners (e.g., the Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), OSI and the Office of Bilingual Education) also hold somewhat different assumptions and beliefs about how to promote improvement in districts and schools.

Different assumptions about change range from a technical/rational approach to a more contextualized, systemic and interpersonal approach to school improvement. These different assumptions for how to effect change may distract and confuse schools, especially chronically low-performing schools that often already lack the organizational capacity to improve.

Different power dynamics between partners. The conditions under which different partners in the Regional Network Strategy engage with clients differ both by partner and by task. One factor in this difference is the authority of the provider relative to the client. Some NYSED staff and offices play a significant monitoring role, so that they have the authority to engage with clients who have little choice about the terms and content of the discussion. State-funded networks often play both a monitoring role, in which they have particular authority to engage with clients, and a “technical assistance” role, in which the “rules of engagement” are different.

Schools identified as in need of improvement or corrective action are not usually required to engage with external partners, including the RSSCs and other regional network partners. As a result, the regional network partners often work at the behest and agreement of their clients and they utilize strategies that recognize this type of relationship.

Different needs assessment and planning strategies. The regional network partners, OSI, and VESID utilize needs assessment processes and engage in planning to guide and structure their work. Although there is a common focus on the use of needs assessment as a tool for planning, we were unable to determine the extent to which there are truly common

approaches across partners in the network strategy. Needs assessments are defined differently as “root cause analyses” or “causal analyses” or as just needs assessments, and there appears to be some difference in how these are conducted.

Shifting roles and lack of clarity. Shifting roles resulting from the requirements of NCLB and implementation of the regional network strategy has led members of the statewide and regional networks to be unclear about their role in the system, including their relationships with each other related to work with client districts and schools. As a result, regional network partners have struggled to define their role in relation to each other and to decide jointly how they will work together. Some regions have developed protocols that clarify their regional roles and expectations for planning and communicating, while other regions are only just beginning to develop such processes.

Monitoring role. There is an ever-present but different monitoring role for all elements of the system. This role is sometimes seen as an inhibitor to providing effective support to schools and districts. Playing the role of a monitor, and having to focus on compliance to state- or federal-regulations, results in a more guarded relationship than one that is optimal for supporting change among district and school staff. Networks often play a dual monitoring/support role, depending on the situation of a particular district or school. While some networks are better able to take on such a role (e.g., SETRC), all of the networks agree that monitoring and support roles and activities should be clearly delineated and, when possible, for the monitoring function to be delegated exclusively to NYSED representatives.

Expanding but limited communication between NYSED and regions. Efforts to increase communication and coordination between NYSED and the regions increased during the first two years of the Regional Network Strategy. However, the mechanisms put in place by NYSED still do not provide enough opportunities for ongoing feedback and information transfer. Strategic and meaningful

two-way interaction is needed for effective policy-making and efficient functioning of all the organizations involved in the Regional Network Strategy.

Integrative Themes

Importance of relationships in supporting improvement and change. The regional network partners, District Superintendents and OSI emphasize the importance of relationships in effecting change. The importance of relationship building is directly linked to the interpersonal and contextual approach that many of the regional network partners utilize with client districts and organizations. The cultivation of positive relationships with client organizations is cited as a necessary precondition to efforts to build capacity in those organizations.

Shared emphasis on capacity building, including using capacity-building strategies. The central objective of the Regional Network Strategy is to build the capacity of schools and districts identified by the state accountability system to sustain organizational performance through ongoing, data-driven planning and action. The regional network partners jointly express this purpose and can actively demonstrate that they use capacity building strategies to support district and school improvement.

Capacity building, for each of the networks, is about using strategies such as job-embedded professional development and approaches such as coaching and mentoring. There is also general agreement that it requires prolonged work with a client and cannot be accomplished through short-term interventions. There appears, however, to be no single understanding of what comprises capacity building either within a single network or organization, or across networks. So while the shared focus on capacity building promotes coherence, continued exploration of this topic will be an important aspect of enhancing the coherence of the overall regional network strategy.

Shared emphasis on using data. All network partners seek to utilize data as a way to move client discussions from exchanges of opinion to discussions of actionable facts.

Working simultaneously with schools and districts. The network partners seek to work simultaneously with personnel at multiple levels: teachers to influence instruction, school leadership, and district staff. A multi-level and systemic approach reflects an understanding among the networks that sustainable school improvement requires using multiple leverage points and must address the core of teaching and learning in addition to organizational and cultural issues.

Increasing and more comprehensive interaction. Over the course of this study, we have observed and documented increasing regional interaction between and among elements of the system. Increased regional interaction is a central element of the Regional Network Strategy, so it is not surprising that the network partners are developing processes to meet on a regular basis and plan their work together.

Increasing state-level coherence. NYSED, and in particular the Office of School Improvement, perceives that one of its roles is to increase coherence at the state level, and it has taken action in that direction. There has been increased interaction between teams within OSI to plan work. Similarly, there has been increased coordination across divisions in NYSED, with the Office of Elementary, Middle, Secondary and Continuing Education (EMSC) and VESID partnering in the creation of cross-office policy, such as Design Principles for Technical Assistance Centers, and giving joint presentations during the regional professional development sessions.

Policy Recommendations

The implementation of the Regional Network Strategy has moved members of the regional network partners and state officials in a positive direction. It is clear that different elements of the system do have much in common (e.g., a shared focus on capacity building and an understanding of the importance of relationship building). These elements provide a solid base upon which to build a coherent system of support. There is evidence of increased cooperation in all regions

and the regional networks are developing ways to systematically work together and share information.

While the Regional Network Strategy has moved participants towards cooperation and more coherent support, there remain a number of areas in which there is a lack of coherence and alignment among players in the system.

Building upon the integrative and interfering themes, we make the following policy recommendations as components of an interlocking strategy designed to create a more tightly coupled system of support. The first two recommendations call upon the joint action of NYSED and the regional network partners. The second set of recommendations call for action to be led by the regional network partners, and the last three recommendations suggest actions that are within the purview of NYSED to implement.

Utilize the expertise of the network partners to continually develop and evaluate regionally based school improvement processes that address the needs of different types of schools and account for regional and contextual variance. Specifically, we suggest that each region, through the coordination of the RSSCs or District Superintendents, continue and extend their ongoing coordination by formally developing and documenting a joint approach to school improvement in shared identified schools.

A coherent and unifying framework for school improvement is a prerequisite of sustainable school improvement. It is important that the regions have such a framework to guide their work and to provide a structure whereby the effectiveness of regional efforts can be assessed.

Continue the statewide learning community of professional members of the support system for schools identified as low performing through ongoing professional development. The Professional Development initiative was a bold attempt to move beyond business as usual. Although it initially increased anxiety and tension among some stakeholder groups, it has subsequently increased

communication between regional and statewide groups and created channels for communication up and down the system. The continued development of a statewide learning community focused on improving low-performing schools is critical for the success of the Regional Network Strategy.

Develop regional criteria and processes to identify schools targeted by the Regional Network Strategy so that the process of entry and engagement into targeted schools is strategic, includes key stakeholders, and integrates the role of the district. Because each network in the Regional Network Strategy has somewhat different criteria for identifying the schools they are expected to serve, there is a lack of clarity over which schools are to be included in the Regional Network Strategy.

We recommend that in addition to using the state-defined criteria to identify the larger set of schools, the regional network partners (including the District Superintendents) jointly develop additional criteria to be used, on a regional basis, to identify the subset of schools that will receive support through the Regional Network Strategy. The subset of schools are those schools in which the regional network partners will jointly decide how to work and in which they will agree to use the statewide protocols to guide their support efforts.

Continue to explore and clarify the theories of action of the different partners involved in the regional network strategy. Although there are a few overarching similarities in the approaches used by the regional networks and in SED, they have different, and sometimes opposing, theories of action, and theories of change in particular. We recommend that the regional networks continue to explore and clarify their theories of action with the goal of developing a joint (e.g., inclusive of the regional network partners in a given region) theory of action that provides a way to organize their work with targeted districts and schools.

Clearly define and communicate the criteria, expectations and roles under which the different partners in the Regional Network

Strategy engage and work with schools and districts. The conditions under which different partners in the Regional Network Strategy engage with clients often differ both by partner and by task. One factor in this difference is the authority of the provider relative to the client. We suggest that the NYSED offices involved in the Regional Network Strategy continue to explore and reflect on these relationship and authority dynamics. By making clear decisions about where authority lies and developing a strategy that utilizes staff in complementary but different roles, NYSED will be better able to sharpen its policies, diminish conflict in the field stemming from role confusion, and provide for increasingly precise conversations about change strategies within the learning community.

Continue to integrate and align the policies and strategies of different divisions and offices within NYSED so that they positively influence the work of the regional networks, including district and school improvement efforts. Different divisions and offices within NYSED work relatively independently, and focus on the programs related to the categorical funding for which they are responsible rather than the implementation of a coherent state approach to supporting schools and districts.

We recommend that NYSED work towards creating a single cross-division strategic plan based on existing Board of Regents policy documents for implementing its Regional Network Strategy. In addition, we recommend that the state consider reflecting on two questions when making policy decisions related to the Regional Network Strategy.

- How will this policy or program affect the ability of the Regional Network Strategy to continue its efforts to increase capacity in targeted schools?
- Will the implementation of this policy/program have a negative impact on the overall coherence and alignment of the roles, purposes, and strategies used by the RSSCs and network partners?

Formally recognize the importance of relationships in school improvement, both in

policy guidance and development and in indicators of success. Formally recognizing the interaction among individuals across the tiers of the multi-level educational system (not just between a principal and her staff, but also between SED staff and regional networks or District Superintendents) will highlight the qualities and characteristics of leaders' interactions as they relate to systemic change and improvement.

To formalize the importance of relationships, we suggest crafting policy so that it accounts for the time and effort needed to build trusting relationships. We suggest exploring ways to measure and explicitly acknowledge relationship building as a contributing factor in successful district and school improvement, and as an indicator of successful engagement and implementation.

Define and communicate the multiple roles of the State Education Department in relation to the implementation of the Regional Network Strategy. Our findings illustrate the rapidly shifting roles and a lack of role clarity across all levels of the system. Much work has been undertaken to clarify roles, as evident in the continued involvement of the networks in the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative and increased coordination of work within regions, and between EMSC and VESID.

Although the integration of EMSC and VESID has and will continue to contribute to coherence across the system, we suggest that NYSED leaders and staff reconsider the role that they play in school and district improvement, especially as it relates to how they directly relate with districts, and especially with individual schools targeted through the Regional Network Strategy. Specifically, we suggest that members of the Office of School Improvement minimize their individual contact with identified schools, except when carrying out required duties in SURR schools or when specifically invited into a school by one of the partner networks and in conjunction with the overall strategy as decided upon by the regional network partners.

Introduction

In 2001, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) implemented a regional approach to supporting improvement efforts in districts and schools identified for improvement through its accountability system. This approach, named the Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement, strategically leverages the resources and expertise of multiple state-funded networks towards the goals of reducing the achievement gap and improving student achievement. The Regional Network Strategy also serves as New York's statewide system of support as required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

One of the premises of the Regional Network Strategy is that a regional and localized approach to school improvement is a more efficient and effective means to provide services to local districts and schools in a state as large, diverse, and complex as New York. In developing a regional strategy, the state has consequently called upon a number of state-funded networks to work together, and in some cases to form new partnerships and co-develop approaches to working together in shared schools. Another premise is that the strategy requires a complex, adaptive problem-solving approach that can best be tackled through creating of a statewide learning community.

The Regional Network Strategy has the advantage of being a systemic approach to school improvement in that it encompasses organizations and networks from different levels of the educational system (e.g., the state, regional networks, districts, and schools) and asks networks and departments/units within levels of the system to consider working together in new ways. However, the advantage of New York's systemic approach to school improvement poses several challenges, not the least of which is the potential for confusion, lack of support and buy-in from regional network partners, and an overall lack of coherence among organizations and individuals asked to support and play a role in the Regional Network Strategy.

The purpose of our overall involvement with NYSED, including writing this report, is to support and inform the state's design and implementation of a comprehensive regional state system of support. As one aspect of that support, this report documents the development of New York's Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement and explores the extent to which coherence exists within and across elements of New York's complex educational system.

The first section of the report provides a detailed description of the Regional Network Strategy, including the history behind the strategy and policies that support or hinder its implementation. Section Two documents the implementation of the strategy, highlighting policies and mechanisms that New York used to promote coherence among elements of the system. Section Three provides an in-depth, cross-group analysis of the extent to which different elements of the system are aligned, share common purposes, assumptions, and ways of working with districts and schools¹. Section Four concludes with a set of policy recommendations for consideration by New York based on our study and our continued involvement in the implementation of Regional Network Strategy.

¹ The cross-group analysis represents the status of regional network partners in the fall of 2004.

Study Overview and Theory of Action

The purpose of this study was to gather information on the development of the Regional Network Strategy, including how the regional network partners² currently work together, and to use this information to inform and promote the ongoing implementation and refinement of the strategy. To understand the current status of the regional network partners, we analyzed (1) the specific strategies that regional network partners and NYSED used to support district and school improvement efforts; (2) the assumptions and rationale guiding the use of strategies and approaches across regional network partners; (3) the differing roles and leadership strategies used by different elements of the system; and (4) how network partners and NYSED implemented and/or adapted elements of the overall Regional Network Strategy.

Our focus on strategies, assumptions, roles, and leadership capacities is based on a particular theory of action that has guided and structured our approach to research and support. We consider the educational system to be a complex, multi-tiered system that is constantly changing. Different tiers of the system have various levels of power, different responsibilities, and oftentimes well-established organizational norms that constrain and promote the actions of individuals across the multi-tiered system (Fullan, 1999, 2003). Within the different tiers of the system, individuals play a major role in the transmission, implementation, and understanding of school reform initiatives. Specifically, individuals and groups interpret, make sense of, and implement school reform initiatives based on organizational norms and their own individual expertise and knowledge of the situation in which they are working (Elmore, 1980; Honig, 2001; McLaughlin, 1997; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). Because of the dynamics of a complex system and the role of the individual in the implementation of education policy, the elements of the system must work together coherently if the system is to be effective.

Our theory of action asserts that internal coherence—*alignment and shared understanding of school improvement processes/approaches within and across levels of the multi-tiered educational system*—will lead to a more effective school support system. An effective school support system is one that improves the capacity of districts and schools to effectively implement research-based strategies and supports in schools and classroom. The theory of action, including the conceptual framework that we have used to illustrate the multi-level nature of New York's educational system, is conveyed in Figure 1. Based on this theory of action, our overarching inquiry questions are as follows:

- What is the extent of internal coherence within each level of the system?
- What is the extent of coherence and alignment between levels of the systems?

Internal coherence does not require that all elements of the system be identical, use the same strategies, or even share the same assumptions about their work. In a fully functional and coherent system, each element of the system may in fact serve different, non-overlapping purposes and so may be different. Internal coherence does require, however, that the assumptions, strategies, and activities of each organizational element operate in support of the others. An overarching assumption is that if this is achieved, the system will create a synergy that will optimize the use of limited resources in the service of identified schools and districts.

² The regional network partners include all NYSED-funded networks. See page 5 for additional information.

**Figure 1. The Study of New York's Regional Network Strategy
Theory of Action and Conceptual Framework**

Central Assumptions of the Study

The education system is complex and multi-tiered.

There are multiple linkages and communication channels across and among all tiers of the system.

Individuals interpret, adapt, and co-opt education policy based on their assumptions, values, and core beliefs.

The implementation of strategies and approaches to school improvement will vary according to the extent that core beliefs and assumptions vary across individuals and organizations.

Internal Coherence

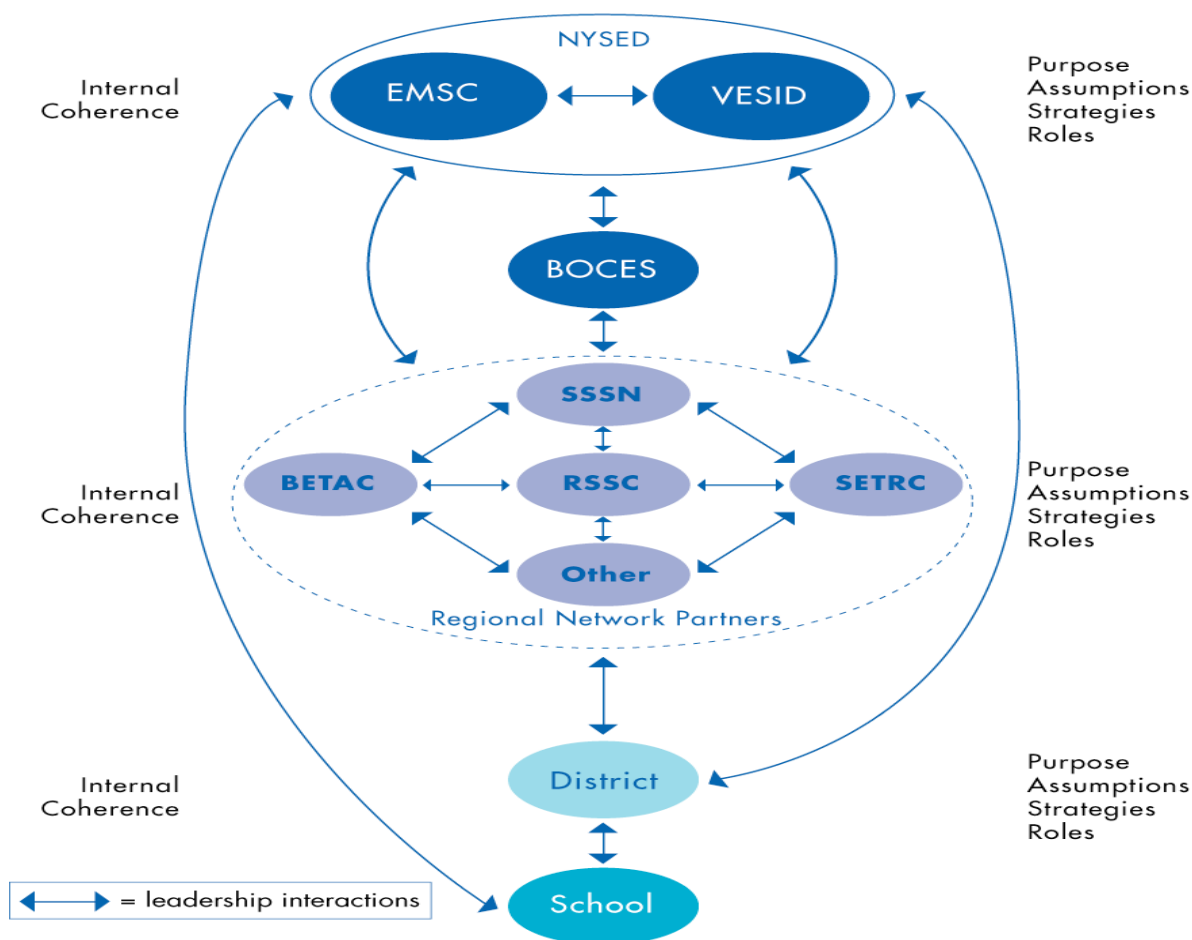
Alignment and shared understanding of school improvement processes/approaches within and across levels of the multi-tiered educational system will lead to a more efficient and effective school support system.

Intended Study Contribution

Increased coherence can be achieved through four steps:

- (1) Describing the existing system, its processes and the assumptions of its members;
- (2) Creating understanding of the current system by engaging with its leaders in discussions that enable them to understand it as it exists;
- (3) Using this approach to expand the choices they have at their disposal to make decisions about the system as a whole; and
- (4) Supporting reflective implementation of those choices.

Conceptual Framework



In the context of New York's development of a Regional Network Strategy, which has involved shifts in roles and responsibilities among various organizations and levels of the educational system, increased coherence and alignment can be achieved through four steps: (1) describing the existing system, its processes, and the assumptions of its members; (2) creating understanding of the current system by engaging with its leaders in discussions that enable them to understand it as it exists; (3) using this approach to expand the choices they have at their disposal to make decisions about the system as a whole; and (4) supporting reflective implementation of those choices. Solving the "larger problem of educational accountability...will require that systems move beyond compliance and sanctions to build the capacity of schools to continually improve. Finally, it will demand state intervention strategies that do more than get people to do the right thing. They must focus instead on the difficult, challenging, and important task of figuring out the right thing to do" (Elmore, 2003).

All research and consultative activities conducted throughout the course of The Education Alliance's three-year involvement with NYSED and the regional network partners have been designed and carried out with these steps in mind. This report represents the culmination of these four steps.

Methodology and Data Collection

Data collection methods were consciously designed to include a mix of formal data collection activities, reflective feedback sessions, and informal and participatory involvement. Formal data collection (e.g., structured group and individual interviews³) with key regional network partners and members of the Office of School Improvement (OSI) took place between March 2004 and November 2004. Approximately 115 individuals from the regional network partners and the OSI participated in structured group or individual interviews⁴. All regions and networks were represented in the data collection activities. (See Table 1: Regional Network Partners who participated in Data Collection Activities). When possible, all members of a regional network participated in the focus groups. Individuals unable to participate in the focus groups were contacted via email and invited to respond to a brief questionnaire.

Reflective feedback sessions with the regional network partners and OSI were held in the fall of 2004. Detailed descriptions of each regional network partner and OSI were written and disseminated to Regional Network Strategy participants in spring of 2005⁵.

Table 1. Regional Network Partners who participated in data collection activities

- Regional School Support Centers (RSSC)
- Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC)
- Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC) and other Special Education Services
- Student Support Services (SSSN)
- Six District Superintendents (in BOCES that housed the RSSCs)

The data collection and subsequent analysis of the regional network partner descriptions and the cross-group synthesis (Section Three) was structured according to the following dimensions drawn from the conceptual framework:

- (a) Purpose(s), rationales, and assumptions
- (b) Strategies and approaches to school improvement
- (c) Roles and responsibilities, including how groups interact with each other
- (d) Leadership Interactions

In addition to formal data collection activities, our research staff participated in the quarterly NYSED Professional Development Initiative meetings, as well as in Advisory and Steering Committees responsible for setting the agenda of the quarterly meetings. The description of how New York is implementing the Regional Network Strategy (Section Two) is based primarily on our participation in and documentation of the quarterly professional development sessions and related committee planning meetings. To complement our field-based data collection activities, we also analyzed a set of policy documents pertaining to the Regional Network Strategy, including Regents Briefs, Strategic Plans, and OSI-prepared presentations⁶.

All data collection methods and activities were selected and specifically designed to gather accurate information from key networks and individuals involved in the Regional Network

³ See Appendix A for structured group and individual interview protocols and questions.

⁴ Appendix B provides a detailed listing of the network partners, participants and dates of data collection activities.

⁵ Appendix C contains the complete set of like-group summary reports.

⁶ See Appendix D for a listing of all policy documents used in this analysis.

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Strategy, confirm with those organizations and individuals that our information was accurate, and then quickly communicate our findings back to the state to inform ongoing efforts.

SECTION I

NEW YORK'S REGIONAL NETWORK STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Overview

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is using the *Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement* to support improvement in schools and districts. The Regional Network Strategy is specifically intended to meet requirements detailed in Section 1117 of Title I in the NCLB Act of 2001—that states must design and implement a system of support for schools and districts identified for improvement under the state's accountability system⁷. While focused primarily on providing assistance to schools and districts identified for improvement through the state's accountability system, the Regional Network Strategy is a component of New York State's overall Statewide School Improvement System designed to implement NCLB and reduce achievement gaps among students based on income level, race/ethnicity and special education or limited English proficiency status (Kadamus, 2004). The objectives of the Regional Network Strategy are to (1) assist schools and districts identified by state accountability systems to improve student achievement in identified areas and (2) build the capacity of identified districts and schools to sustain organizational performance through ongoing professional development, data-driven planning, and action. In September 2004, NYSED entered its second full year of implementing the Regional Network Strategy.

Key Features of the Regional Network Strategy

New York State's Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement uses existing regional networks and resources rather than state-level intervention as the primary method of school improvement. In order to provide and coordinate regional services, the state competitively funds seven Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs) across the state, with one RSSC in New York City and the remaining six responsible for different geographic regions outside NYC. The RSSCs have primary responsibility for providing technical assistance and support to districts and schools identified for improvement. Within their regions, RSSCs assist with required school and district planning, provide job-embedded professional development to build instructional and organizational capacity, and serve as buffers and translators of state and federal policy. Additionally, RSSCs are responsible for coordinating the services and supports of other organizations and networks that provide assistance in identified districts and schools.

In their role as a coordinating organization, RSSCs work with a number of well-established partners and regional networks funded by NYSED. These networks address bilingual education, school climate and environment, special education, and other services and supports to meet the

⁷ By February 2005, there were a total of 525 schools identified as in need of improvement or under corrective action.

needs of students and school districts. The four primary networks⁸ involved in the Regional Network Strategy include:

- Regional School Support Centers (RSSC)
- Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC)
- Student Support Services Network (SSSN)
- Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC)

Each network has different regional boundaries and different staffing arrangements. For instance, there are over 40 SETRC offices located across the state, with each office housing from one to four (typically three) staff. On the other hand, there are seven SSSN offices located in regions that mirror the RSSC regions. SSSN offices typically include a Coordinator and three to four additional staff. There are a total of 13 BETAC offices, with eight regional offices located outside of New York City.

Additional key partners include the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) District Superintendents, local school Superintendents (especially in the major urban centers), and SED staff and liaisons who work with state-identified schools.

History and Background of the Regional Network Strategy

With the passage of the NCLB Act of 2001, New York (like other states with considerable urban and high-need schools) faced the likely prospect of a sharp increase in the number of schools identified for improvement. That has since been realized. Also influencing NYSED's decision-making process was their history (and related infrastructure) of providing regional assistance to schools through mechanisms such as the Effective Schools Consortium and the BOCES located regionally across the state. New York has traditionally used a regional approach to school assistance, though it has not always been tied to a state educational accountability system. Lastly, NYSED experienced a significant decrease in their staffing level between 1994 and 2004, rendering it increasingly unable to provide the level of field services that it did historically, and there is little chance of this decline reversing in the near future.

Within this context, New York developed the Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement as a means of leveraging and refocusing existing resources (e.g., existing networks) so that identified low-performing schools receive customized and coordinated support. The OSI sets criteria for which schools are to be served, and annually determines which schools will be served from lists proposed by the RSSC Executive Committee, recognizing that the networks cannot meet the needs of all identified schools with the resources available to them. By prioritizing schools and then strategically providing support based on their level of need, New York is working to avoid the inevitable strain on resources that trying to provide a high level of services to all low-performing schools exacts. A strategic approach, the Department argues, can better provide schools with supports and services appropriate to their individual needs and the local context.

⁸ The Regional Network Strategy draws upon the resources of many additional networks and organizations, but the official responsibility of the four networks listed here is to coordinate their work to improve the academic performance of students in identified schools and districts.

The official rationale for the Regional Network Strategy is provided in the *Report on School Improvement Initiatives* submitted to the Board of Regents in the fall of 2003. The report states,

Partnering with regional networks is an important component of the department's statewide school improvement strategy. Regional networks bring services closer to schools and draw upon local experts who are familiar with the political and school context. Regional networks may provide general assistance (i.e., improving English language arts and mathematics) or more specialized assistance (i.e., to address needs of bilingual students and students whose first language is not English, and address school discipline and attendance issues)." (Kadamus, 2003, p. 5).

The regional approach to school improvement supported by NYSED reflects an intentional mix of and appreciation for externally driven approaches to school improvement promoted by NCLB (e.g., planning, monitoring, and state intervention) and locally developed approaches; however, balancing these different approaches to change does present a number of challenges. For instance, the regional networks intentionally utilize a variety of strategies and approaches when working with schools and districts. This adaptive and context-based approach to school improvement is often in conflict with the approach promoted by state-level officials. While most state officials, and in particular the staff in New York's OSI, value and understand the intent of the regional network strategy, the pressure to maintain consistency and meet NCLB requirements often leads OSI officials to focus on *technical solutions*, such as planning and targeted interventions, to problems in the schools that are identified through state assessments (e.g., a school's performance in a particular grade and subject level). Instead of approaching school improvement from a rational, linear perspective, the regional networks tend to utilize a *strategic, systemic, and pragmatic approach* that is context-based, emphasizes the development of relationships with identified schools, and is flexible enough to allow the networks to engage and work with schools in multiple ways.

Policy Supports. Three policies have directly influenced the development of the Regional Network Strategy. First, NYSED created the RSSCs in 2000 to work with districts and schools identified for improvement. Approximately \$6.5 million was allocated for nine RSSCs throughout the state, not including New York City. After three years, this number decreased to six RSSCs because NYSED did not have the resources to adequately fund nine. Second, in spring of 2003 the Office of Elementary, Middle, Secondary and Continuing Education (EMSC) reviewed its organizational structure related to their capacity to implement the NCLB Act of 2001 and subsequently created an Office of School Improvement and Community Services responsible for designing and implementing the state's system of support for school improvement, including the Regional Network Strategy. Third, the state developed a set of design principles for the Office of Elementary, Middle, Secondary and Continuing Education technical assistance centers (extended to all networks involved in the strategy as funding cycles expire and are renewed). In addition to covering common principles about clients, staffing, funding, and operations, the design principles direct "the greatest portion possible of technical assistance centers' time and resources...to provision of direct services to SED identified school and districts." These principles are being incorporated into contracts with successful bidders for networks as contracts are renewed. When all of the Regional Network Partners are funded through contracts that incorporate the design principles (e.g., the contracts for BETAC and SSSN

are expected to be awarded by January 2006), the network partners will have joint objectives focusing on school improvement and have an organizing framework to assist in the alignment of their strategies and actions to support identified districts and schools.

By incorporating the design principles into contracts, NYSED recognized that identified schools require special assistance. State-funded networks that historically have not been asked to focus their efforts on schools identified for improvement are now shifting their priorities and resources to support those schools. The shift in roles and responsibilities has increased tension in some networks and in the State Education Department. This tension stems from the pressure, both internal and external, on networks to continue to provide a basic level of support to their targeted audiences (e.g., English Language Learners, special education students) in the face of new demands to support low-performing schools. Managing the shift in roles and responsibilities to focus on low-performing schools without losing (or devaluing) the skills and expertise the different networks have developed to support particular student populations is an ongoing struggle.

Policy Challenges. Although New York's unified educational accountability system has been approved by the U.S. Department of Education, traces of a dual accountability system continue to complicate school improvement efforts. Depending on how it is identified (e.g., through NCLB, through IDEA, Title I, or non-Title I), a school may be asked to submit multiple, often redundant, school improvement plans. Inconsistencies in planning and documentation requirements also constrain efforts to coordinate technical assistance and support.

Other federal or state policies that can hinder local improvement efforts include the lack of integration between IDEA, NCLB, and large federal initiatives such as Reading First. Policies and funding streams that are not fully integrated or that add to their responsibilities tend to decrease the regional networks' ability to provide coherent and coordinated support to identified districts and schools. Adding to the lack of coherence, three regional networks are funded through functionally separate NYSED offices that do not have a history of working together. As noted earlier, conflicting mandates and structural constraints, coupled with apprehension that their network's mission may in some way be devalued if the focus of their work is low-performing schools, has in some instances limited the willingness of networks to coordinate their efforts with the RSSCs.

Opportunities and Challenges

As described on the last few pages, New York is engaged in an innovative and systemic approach to school improvement that has the potential to leverage resources from historically distinct and isolated departments and funding sources. Systemic change is almost always difficult, as it requires that individuals revisit their core values and beliefs, reflect upon how they work with each other and with districts and schools, and reconsider their role and relationships to others. Systemic change is also, however, an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and to build and foster new relationships among leaders and organizations that do not have existing relationships or, in the past, did not see a reason to work together. The organizational constraints stemming from historical (as well as ongoing) categorical funding patterns are artificial constraints that have been institutionalized over time, and it is unclear if these barriers continue

to be functionally useful. New York's implementation of the Regional Network Strategy provides an opportunity for state officials and regional network partners to reconsider how they work together to build capacity in low-performing districts and schools.

Our research across the Northeast region illustrates the impact of NCLB and the potential challenges and opportunities it provides, as summarized in the following passage:

The implementation of strategies to support schools and districts in need of improvement has highlighted and, in some cases, exacerbated tensions among leaders of different role groups. But some changes, e.g., new structures, roles, feedback mechanisms, have also opened up opportunities for new ways of working.

Some responses to NCLB have thrust together leaders from different levels of the system to address urgent problems—whether to diagnose causes of persistently low performance, coordinate and focus various supports, or determine the value of competing solutions. If managed well, these opportunities for cross-role and cross-level dialogue can be a source of energy for tackling challenging problems. Leaders who perceive that others understand and share their concerns are more willing to collaborate on solutions.

To New York's credit, they recognized early on that policy decisions and mandates would not be sufficient to engage and obtain fully the support of all of the regional network partners. In March 2004, NYSED initiated a set of quarterly Professional Development sessions, named the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative, as a means of engaging the regional partners in the development of the statewide learning community.

SECTION II

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL NETWORK STRATEGY

New York's Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement is part of the state's educational accountability system. As such, it is policy with a specific rationale (to bring services closer to schools and draw upon local experts) and goal (to close the achievement gap in identified schools). Policies are typically designed under the logic that attainment of the goal(s) put forward by a given policy requires the policy to be implemented as intended by the original designers of the policy. However, research tells us that policy is almost never implemented as intended (Fullan, 1999; McLaughlin 1987). Individuals asked to implement policy—the policy implementers—necessarily interpret and then implement policy through their own frame of reference (Coburn, 1999; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002). The local adaptation of policy is oftentimes seen as a barrier to effective policy implementation instead of an asset, thus rendering negligible the tremendous expertise and knowledge held and gained by practitioners in the field.

Research suggests that effective policy implementation recognizes and anticipates local adaptation of policy by individuals at each level of the system, including in the state department of education (Hamann & Lane, 2004). Instead of ignoring or attempting to bypass (through mandates or directives) the interpretive role of the individual, effective policy proactively utilizes local adaptation and knowledge as a critical element in the design and implementation of policy.

The original design of the Regional Network Strategy explicitly recognized and valued the role of field-based and regional (thus closest to the school) organizations and individuals. However, the decision to have the networks begin to partner and work together within regions was made with minimal input from District Superintendents or network leaders. So although the original design of the Regional Network Strategy held the potential to recognize and access the expertise and knowledge of those working directly with districts and schools, it did not provide a mechanism for individuals to engage in dialogue with their colleagues so that they could develop a shared understanding of what they were being asked to implement.

The state leaders responsible for the Regional Network Strategy understood that its implementation was going to require substantial shifts in thinking, behavior, and ways of working together. Our study documents that the initial implementation of the Regional Network Strategy occasioned necessary shifts in roles and responsibilities (among state officials and within the regional networks), bringing personnel from different levels of the state's education system to work together in new ways. These changes have highlighted a number of stress points in its education system. As leaders across the system are being asked to work together to improve schools, a tremendous need (and opportunity) for cross-role and cross-level communication and dialogue has emerged.

NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

The Assistant Commissioner in charge of OSI decided that the best way to support the implementation of the Regional Network Strategy would be to involve staff of relevant state-funded networks (e.g., the regional network partners) and state-level offices (VESID, OSI and the Office of Bilingual Education) in ongoing professional development and creation of a statewide learning community. The central goal of the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative was to create a statewide learning community through which participants would develop a common understanding of the responsibilities of each of the network partners and related NYSED offices. Held on a quarterly basis, the two-day professional development sessions also provide a forum for the networks to begin to develop coordinated regional strategies for their joint support in schools identified as low performing.

The stated objectives of the professional development are to:

- Develop a statewide learning community that focuses on effective ways of supporting low-performing schools.
- Develop a shared understanding and appreciation of the roles and responsibilities that each network brings to the schools, and of the supporting role the networks play in low-performing schools.
- Identify existing relationships among networks at the state and regional levels and activities that can increase the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness of networks across the entire system to build capacity in low-performing schools and districts.

Two basic assumptions guided the development of the content and structure for the professional development sessions. First, members of the initial planning committee, including the Assistant Commissioner for OSI, understood that the implementation of the Regional Network Strategy would require existing state-funded networks to reconsider how they engage with each other and with target districts and schools. Regional work could easily become fragmented and ineffective without a coherent regional approach to district and school improvement. To address this need, the professional development sessions built in time and structures for the regional networks to discuss emerging ways to work with each other.

Second, central to the development of the professional development sessions was the idea that questions related to school improvement and the design of an effective support system had yet to be adequately framed. This especially held true in a complex setting such as New York. Thus, the structure of the professional development had to afford participants the opportunity to identify those questions and explore and identify the appropriately complex and adaptive solutions to problems as yet to be defined (Heifitz, 1994). To this end, the professional development sessions needed to be mission-driven, strive to develop coherence at every level of the system, and be supported by a learning community that would access the expertise of all involved. The implication of this approach was that the collective wisdom of the learning community would inform detailed policy development and strategy implementation.

The professional development sessions have focused on broad educational issues that are critical to the improvement of low-performing schools. Table 2 displays the dates and related content for the six sessions that have been held since January 2004.

Table 2. NYSED Regional Professional Development – Session Dates and Topic Areas

Session Date	Topic Areas	Inquiry Questions
January 2004	Leadership Capacity Building Learning Communities	• What does leadership mean? What does capacity mean? • How do our schools differ in their leadership? • How does leadership affect capacity? • How do we build capacity? • What is the role of learning communities in capacity building?
March 2004	System Coherence	• What is it? • What does it look like in schools? • How do we promote it?
June 2004	System Thinking	• What is it? • How can it inform our work? • How does it relate to leadership?
September 2004	System Thinking and the Need for Change	• How do systems dynamics help us understand the change process? • Where do we fit in the system? • How do we need to change?
January 2005	Coherence and Diversity	• How do we reduce the variance in the regional approach for school engagement, planning, implementation and evaluation? • How do we enhance our understanding of diversity to close the achievement gap?
April 2005	Coherence and Diversity	

During the professional development sessions, the various groups engage in content- and process-oriented activities focused on the session's theme; the sessions are designed to bring cross-network and cross-regional participants together to promote interaction and productive dialogue. A core element of the professional development activity is to organize sub-group meetings in which representatives from the six regions meet and plan how to work together within those regions. It is expected that these regional groups will continue this work between quarterly sessions. By structuring the professional development sessions this way, New York provides a forum to reduce professional isolation and support the kinds of cross-role and cross-level learning and interaction needed to best support low-performing schools. Specifically, the expectation is that by participating in statewide professional development, state officials and members of the regional networks will increase the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness of the entire system to build capacity in low-performing schools and districts.

Participation, Next Steps, and Impact

The professional development sessions have been well attended by representatives from most of the networks involved in the Regional Network Strategy⁹. The first professional development session was held in January 2004. Attendees included approximately 120 staff from two of the four regional networks (e.g., RSSC and SSSN), all OSI professional staff, representatives from

⁹ BETAC has not been fully represented during the OSI professional development sessions.

the New York City SED and RSSC staff, and representatives from Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, the office in SED responsible for addressing special education regulations and services.

Since the initial session, five additional professional development sessions have been organized. Participation in these sessions was expanded in September 2004 to include additional networks, and included approximately 150 representatives from other state-funded networks included in the Regional Network Strategy (e.g., SETRC, BETAC) and other partners, including the Regional Adult Education Network, Transition Coordination Sites and representative from (state-funded) teacher centers.

Initially, network representatives and OSI managers experienced high levels of discomfort as they reflected on their roles and tried to define themselves in relation to partner networks (or, in the case of the state, in relation to the regional networks in the field). After participating in a total of five professional development sessions (between January 2004 and January 2005), OSI Managers, staff and network representatives have changed how they relate to and work with each other. State officials have begun to relinquish their role as the “expert” and increasingly engage in peer-based and constructive discussions about their roles and responsibilities in best supporting low-performing schools. Representatives from each network report increased understanding of each other’s roles as well as increased collaboration with partner networks.

Table 3. Percentage of respondents reporting training led to increased collaboration

Participation in the NYSED Training has resulted in:	RSSC	SETRC	BETAC	SSSN
More collaboration with other networks	58%	78%	80%	30%

While some networks (and some regions of the state) have struggled more than others, networks in all regions held regional meetings between professional development sessions and worked on ways to fulfill the demands of their new roles. Each region has developed different strategies for sharing information across networks, coordinating work, and identifying which networks should best work in which schools. These strategies include piloting a collaborative approach to working together in a single school or district; creating a regional leadership group of all networks involved in the professional development; and creating a web-accessed database on the activities of each network in schools. However, the requirement that different networks now work together has led to some tension, as specialists in different areas (e.g., special education, English language learners and general education) must now work together to meet the needs of all students, not only the students falling under their particular specialty area. These regional strategies are in the beginning stages, so it is too early to inform practice.

The regional professional development has also been effective in supporting the development of a statewide learning community focused on improved student performance. Beginning with the June 2004 professional development session, participants have been asked to rate their perception of the entire group’s progress towards becoming a professional learning community. Overall, participant ratings have been positive and display a positive trend towards the development of the key elements of a learning community and the ability of the regional

networks to work together in a coherence and efficient manner. A sample of the participant ratings¹⁰ is provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Participant perception of the group as a professional learning community

1 = Absent from everyone	Scale				5 = Present in everyone
	June 2004	Sept 2004	Jan 2005	April 2005	Mean Difference
Requirements of an effective learning community					
Public knowledge of who and what we are as individuals and as sub-groups	2.69	3.17	3.15	3.33	0.64*
Broad awareness of individual goals and needs	2.55	3.23	3.06	3.12	0.57*
Willingness among community members to reveal themselves to learn from each other	2.91	3.24	3.41	3.57	0.66*
Concern among members for each other's growth and learning: members are curious, make suggestions, etc.	3.01	3.27	3.32	3.57	0.56*
Appreciation of, and the ability to seek out and use, differences and diversity	2.84	2.66	3.04	3.19	0.35*
Willingness among members to step in and perform needed roles and behaviors, regardless of formal position	3.26	3.47	3.74	3.84	0.58*
A built-in, ongoing, self-assessment and feedback system for both individuals and the community	2.47	2.80	3.22	3.43	0.96*
Built-in, ongoing support for each member	2.63	3.03	3.07	3.29	0.66*
Numerous and diverse connections among individuals, sub-groups, and the whole group	3.11	3.14	3.42	3.66	0.55*

* Significant at .05

At the conclusion of the first year of the professional development initiative (January – September, 2004), the planning and advisory committees responsible for designing the professional development sessions revisited the focus and purpose of overall initiative. The two committees, consisting of representatives from the regional network partners and NYSED offices, considered participant input and ongoing session evaluations and assessed the progress that the regional networks had made during the first year of the initiative. Based on this review and additional input from NYSED, it was decided that the goal of the 2004-05 school year was to: “Reduce the variance in the regional approach for school engagement, planning, implementation and evaluation.” The objectives of the professional development initiative were also refined to reflect a greater emphasis on developing and cooperatively using specific tools, protocols and processes to support school improvement efforts.

To achieve the overarching goal and related objectives, one topic area in the past three professional development sessions has been the drafting and refining of proposed common protocols (e.g., guidance documents) to be used by the regional network partners in their joint work with identified districts and schools. The protocols address the central steps involved in engaging and working with districts and schools on schools improvement: Entry and Engagement, Needs Assessment, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation. The statewide protocols will be issued by NYSED as policy documents during the summer of 2005 for implementation in the fall of 2005. NYSED expects that the implementation of the statewide protocols will improve

¹⁰ See Appendix E for the complete results from the learning community survey.

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the alignment of approaches and strategies used across regions and increase the overall capacity of the Regional Network Strategy to improve student performance in identified districts and schools.

SECTION III CROSS-GROUP ANALYSIS

Assessing Internal Coherence

New York's Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement is a complex educational system that requires interaction among and across organizations at different levels. As a complex system, it is able to leverage extensive resources that would otherwise not be available if New York was to use a more limited approach to school improvement. While a systems approach has advantages, particularly in an environment where additional resources to address the needs of identified schools and districts are severely limited, the different components of the system must work together in an efficient manner if those advantages are to be realized. To better understand the coherence of New York's strategy, defined as the *alignment and shared understanding of school improvement processes/approaches within and across levels of the multi-tiered educational system*, our study documented how the central players in the Regional Network Strategy worked with targeted districts and schools and with each other.

The documentation of the regional network partners we studied, as well as the Office of School Improvement (OSI) is provided as six stand-alone, like-group summary reports that are included in their entirety in Appendix C. The like-group summaries offer a detailed view of how different elements of New York's Regional Network Strategy actually engage in the difficult work of district and school improvement¹¹. We encourage the reader to refer to the like-group summaries to learn more about the specific strategies that network partners are using and the assumptions upon which those strategies are based. For the purpose of this report, we conducted a cross-group analysis to understand how the Regional Network Strategy was working as a coherent system.

The cross-group analysis is organized as a set of themes that characterize and describe the system as it existed in the summer and fall of 2004. The themes are organized according to the four dimensions of our conceptual framework: (1) purpose, rationale, and assumptions; (2) strategies and approaches to school improvement; (3) roles and responsibilities; and (4) leadership interactions. For each theme, evidence is drawn from the like-group summaries and provides an overview of the implications for the overall coherence of the Regional Network Strategy. Four themes were identified related to the purpose(s), rationale and assumptions guiding the strategies and actions of the regional network partners. We also identified nine themes characterizing the specific strategies, roles, and leadership interactions of different actors involved in the strategy.

To aid in our analysis, we categorized the identified themes as they related to the overall coherence of the Regional Network Strategy. *Integrative themes* are those characteristics of the system that support and enhance coherence. *Interfering themes* are characteristics that, if unrecognized or unaddressed, tend to limit or reduce coherence. The organization of the themes across the four dimensions does not imply a causal link between different characteristics. Rather, we used the dimensions to illustrate observed and potential paths of influence drawn from our

¹¹ The like-group summary reports are based on information collected during the spring, summer, and fall of 2004 and reflect the status of the Regional Network Strategy at that time.

analysis. In some cases, the network partners made explicit the connection between a particular assumption or rationale and a specific strategy. In other cases, we extrapolated from the data to explore potential connections between different themes and then discuss the implications of different paths of influence. Figure 2 provides a visual representation and listing of the cross-group themes.

Figure 2. Cross-group Themes influencing the Internal Coherence of the Regional Network Strategy

	Purpose(s), rationales and assumptions	Implications of purposes, rationales and assumptions		
		Strategies and approaches to school improvement	Roles and responsibilities	Leadership Interactions
Interfering Themes	• Different identification criteria for working with districts and schools. • Different assumptions about the most effective methods for inducing change. • Different assumptions about the role of power among network partners and state offices influence interactions with districts and schools.	• Different needs assessment and planning strategies. • Improvement efforts occur simultaneously at multiple levels (e.g., schools and districts).	• Shifting roles and lack of clarity across all levels of the system • Monitoring and support roles tend to oscillate between NYSED and regional network partners.	• Expanding but limited communication between NYSED and regions.
Integrative Themes	• Building trusting relationships is critical for improvement and change. • The networks work towards whole school change and improvement, regardless of their point of entry.	• Shared emphasis on capacity building, including the use of capacity-building strategies. • Shared emphasis on using data to inform school improvement processes.		• Increasing and more comprehensive interaction. • Increasing state-level interaction and common planning.

The visual overview and categorization (Integrative or Interfering) of the cross-group themes and the detailed descriptions of the themes that follow provides a way to discuss the extent to which New York's Regional Network Strategy is a coherent and efficient system. Further, it suggests what a fully coherent system may in fact look like within a context as complex as New York's. For instance, different identification criteria and various assumptions about change influence how the regional network partners engage with schools and partially explain why they use different needs assessment and planning processes. Although the network partners as a whole are characterized as having somewhat different theories of change, they do share an emphasis on building capacity and a common understanding that a differentiated approach to school improvement at multiple levels of the system is needed to bring about change. Some themes (such as relationship building or a shared focus on capacity building) have an integrative function, while others themes tend to tip the balance away from a coherent system towards dysfunction and fragmentation.

Our evidence suggests that New York's Regional Network Strategy currently does not display the characteristics of a fully coherent system of support, as the alignment is incomplete and there is incomplete evidence of shared understanding of school improvement processes/approaches within and across levels of the system. This finding should not come as a surprise, as the Regional Network Strategy is only entering its third full year of implementation and continues to bring new partners into the strategy. The use of the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative, as well as other mechanisms, are ways in which the state can foster those themes that have an integrative function while minimizing the potential negative influence of interfering themes.

Purpose(s), rationales, and assumptions

Different identification criteria. Different criteria, generally ones aligned with the various sources of funding that drive initiatives, are used to identify schools and districts with which to work. As a result, there is an overall lack of clarity among the regional network partners as to the set of schools that are to be supported through the regional network strategy. This confusion has implications for how the regional network partners work together, as well as for the development and use of statewide protocols for school improvement.

SETRC and RSSCs each have clearly defined criteria for targeting districts and schools that, although different, do tend to identify overlapping districts and schools. SETRC utilizes well-defined Key Performance Indicators (KPI) to determine which schools and districts to target. The RSSCs are required to work with districts and schools that have been identified as in need of improvement or corrective action through the state's accountability system, and specifically to support a subset of these districts and schools that are farthest from meeting state standards. The RSSCs typically work with their Executive Boards to identify the targeted set of schools that they will work with over the school year. RSSCs also work with schools funded through Reading First, although these schools are seldom identified for improvement through the state's accountability system.

The BETACs, on the other hand, are expected to serve all schools and districts with English Language Learners (ELLs) regardless of accountability status. Due to inadequate data, BETACs have had difficulty identifying and targeting schools where ELL students are performing least well on state assessments. The New York ESL Achievement Test will change this and will provide them with data to further inform their targeting. Similarly, the Student Support Services (SSS) network has no single set of criteria by which to determine which schools to serve. In fact, its multiple funding sources have different criteria that determine whom they are required to serve.

District Superintendents are charged by the Commissioner to focus their efforts on closing the achievement gap, and they are actively seeking to define and utilize strategies to achieve this goal. State-funded networks are the single additional resource District Superintendents have for this purpose, but they are also seeking to align existing resources to address the needs of schools that have not yet been identified but are unlikely to meet expectations in the future. This

represents a shift from the market-based strategy that has tended to drive the work of the BOCES.

For the regional network partners, the lack of clear policy guidelines relating to targeting appears to increase concern about whom to serve under the Regional Network Strategy. How do networks that must serve a general population maintain existing contacts and requirements, and simultaneously add the burden of schools in need of improvement? How are decisions made about when to partner formally with other networks? How do the regional network partners know when a school is officially part of the regional network strategy?

Different assumptions about change. Regional network partners hold slightly different but evolving assumptions about the most effective methods for inducing change in client organizations. The state-level parent departments for the regional partners (e.g., VESID, OSI and the Office of Bilingual Education) also hold somewhat different assumptions and beliefs about how to promote improvement in districts and schools, however, the differences in core beliefs among state-level offices do not, as one might initially predict, reflect the differences observed among the network partners. Instead, the most pronounced differences are apparent between SED offices and the regional network partners.

When schools and districts work with different networks, and sometimes directly with representatives of NYSED, different assumptions for how to effect change (e.g., different theories of change) may distract and confuse schools. Chronically low-performing schools are generally unskilled at effectively managing change and successfully negotiating the approaches to change of external providers. In their study of the impact of external supports for the Chicago Public Schools, Finnigan and O'Day (2003) raise this as an issue and suggest that, "the picture is further complicated when...there are multiple...providers for one school" (p. 11). In fact, creating clear theories of change and making them explicit to clients adds to clients' capacities by providing them with criteria by which to select programs or providers compatible with their approaches. Different assumptions about change are operationalized in different planning processes, different ways of interacting with district and school leaders, and different types of professional development and intervention strategies.

District Superintendents differentiated between approaches that generally depend on influencing through developing trusting relationships and characterize an alternative, predominantly NYSED approach that tended towards dictating and expecting compliance. However, they report experiencing that VESID is increasingly adopting a facilitative role in seeking to move its policy objectives. The RSSCs report using approaches to change that emphasize flexibility and attention to context. They have sought to develop protocols that integrate research on school improvement and organizational change theory. RSSCs describe their work as facilitating reflection among district and school leaders and building mechanisms that allow for meaningful discourse around teaching and learning. RSSCs describe their work in the following ways:

- Capacity building and dialogue lead to changes in teacher practice. We need to lay the foundation for meaningful discourse in schools.
- We foster professional dialogue and trust among teachers.

- [Our] approach is multifaceted; it is different because I look for places where I have good entry; the approach is contextually based.

SETRC and SSSN, like the RSSCs, use strategies that are based on the belief that real change and sustained improvement requires that administrations and teachers take ownership of their own learning and be willing to ask hard questions about teaching and learning. School improvement is directly related to the organizational capacity of the school—the ability of the district or school to ask critical questions, develop the willingness and buy-in to implement new practices or curricula, and then sustain these improvements over time. The focus on developing high-performing organizations through capacity building entails using strategies for which effectiveness and impact is not easily measured, such as trust and relationship building, cognitive coaching, and inquiry-based approaches. As one SETRC staff said, “If you do your job well, they [school leaders] shouldn’t notice that you’ve done your job.” Even though SETRC formally targets special education students, they, like the RSSCs and SSSN, argue that their work is focused on overall schoolwide improvement, not just the improvement of a particular sub-group.

BETACs assumptions about change are more focused on supporting a particular population than the assumptions vocalized by the RSSCs, SSSN, and the District Superintendents. BETAC representatives work on “changing the mindset of mainstream teachers,” stemming from the assumption that many mainstream teachers do not understand the needs of diverse and LEP students. While BETAC staff provide high quality and critical support and technical assistance, the assumptions guiding their support are less aligned with the assumptions held by the other regional partners involved in this study.

All of the organizations within the network strategy can be characterized as falling along a continuum of different conceptualizations of change based on varying assumptions about how an external agent can best support local school improvement initiatives. An illustration of how the different assumptions play out across seven dimensions in which an external agent may interact with a district or school is provided below in Table 5.

Table 5: Continuum of assumptions behind different approaches to change

<i>Dimension of School Improvement</i>	Rational/Structural	–	Interpersonal, Systemic and Contextual
<i>Overall Focus</i>	Structure, function, tasks, roles, rules	–	People, culture, meaning, motivation
<i>Organization</i>	Seek to create stable, logical organization	–	See change as continuous and inevitable, organization as fluid
<i>Innovation</i>	Bring in product with fixed outcome	–	Engage in process with emerging outcome
<i>Entry</i>	Well defined, sequenced steps	–	Build relationship, which will influence steps that follow
<i>Assessment</i>	Always begin work with full needs assessment	–	Build on what exists, deepen over time.
<i>Planning</i>	Focus on writing plan as blueprint	–	Focus on planning as ongoing activity
<i>Implementation</i>	Almost purely top-down, disseminating, pressuring	–	Top-down and bottom-up, commitment building

The left column of the continuum describes assumptions behind a rational/structural approach to school improvement. The *rational*, or what Evans (1996) describes as a technical approach, typically focuses on a structured process of needs assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation as the most effective means to improve teaching and learning. The right hand column details a process that focuses on interpersonal relations, developing strategic and systemic approaches, and building upon the context and commitments of the client as critical components of the change process.

Although we have not ventured to place each of the regional network partners and OSI along this continuum, we suggest that this is a potentially useful way to better understand the assumptions and core beliefs of the partners involved in the Regional Network Strategy, especially as more organizations are included in the scope of its work.

Different power dynamics between partners. The conditions under which different partners in the Regional Network Strategy engage with clients often differ both by partner and by task. One factor in this difference is the authority of the provider relative to the client. At one end of the continuum NYSED staff members (both Special Education Quality Assurance [SEQA] and OSI) play a significant monitoring role, and in that role have the authority to engage with clients who have little choice about the terms and content of the discussion. State-funded networks report that they play both a monitoring role, in which they have particular authority to engage with clients, and a “technical assistance” role, in which the “rules of engagement” are different. In the case of schools identified as in need of improvement or corrective action, there are requirements for planning and the expectation of change but there is no requirement that they engage in that change with the assistance of any particular external partner.

As a result, the regional network partners often work at the behest and agreement of their clients and they utilize strategies that recognize this type of relationship. RSSCs speak of facilitating learning and understanding rather than telling people what to do. SSS staff members use an

inquiry-based approach to promote ownership. SETRC seeks to influence, but the school or district chooses and invests in a course of action. BETAC staff members report that they work at the invitation of administrators. District Superintendents also see themselves as facilitators when addressing the needs of schools identified as low performing. They have little formal authority and depend on influence through relationships.

Several participants in our structured interviews reported that they wished to have more authority to enter schools whether they were wanted or not, as is possible when they enter in a monitoring role. Others did not hold that position, valuing an approach in which the authority for decisions lies entirely with the client. This issue appears to remain unresolved. In our discussions with the regional partners, we observed a lack of clarity about the criteria and expectations for engagement with clients, and where the power lies to make decisions or carry out activities within a school or district. There was discussion, for instance, of networks carrying out needs assessments. This example illustrates the different power dynamics by raising the question of whether network staff members or schools are responsible for carrying out needs assessments. Most network staff commented that they do not have formal authority for carrying out activities within a school without the express permission from the school, nor do they have the power to mandate action within that school.

OSI staff, on the other hand, did not generally convey a similar need to attend to access and engagement. They appear to work out of a different power differential—one in which they have more hierarchical authority because they are employed by NYSED. This difference in relationship and the implications it has for strategy does not appear to be fully understood by NYSED staff. Finally, we also observe that there is among some the implicit assumption that it is relatively easy to move from a consulting to a monitoring role with the same client. We perceive that the dynamics of the relationships of these two roles make this difficult to achieve.

Importance of relationships in supporting improvement and change. The regional network partners, District Superintendents and OSI emphasize the importance of relationships in effecting change. The importance of relationship building is directly linked to the interpersonal and contextual approach that many of the regional network partners utilize with client districts and organizations. The cultivation of positive relationships with client organizations is cited as a necessary precondition to efforts to build capacity in those organizations. For instance, most of the network partners argue that the effective provision of support strategies (e.g., planning with teachers and school or district administrators, providing targeted job-embedded professional development, or asking a school to take a critical look at how they work with special education students) requires a certain level of trust and respect that is based on positive relationships with individuals in districts and schools. Active relationships are also seen as a mechanism that allows the regional network partners to foster sustainable improvements in client organizations, even though (as noted earlier) the networks often have little positional authority to force districts or schools to work with them.

RSSC staff members report that relationships and building trust are needed to make human connections so that individuals become invested and committed. Many SSS staff members have a background in school counseling and use professional skills from that discipline to develop relationships that facilitate effective work with their clients. SETRC seeks to build relationships

with key administrators and other staff. It is also in SETRC's best interest to influence the membership of the teams it works with to ensure that it has access to those who will in turn influence change.

The Regional Network Strategy recognizes the importance of relationships in school improvement in an informal way. Many members of the OSI understand and state that current strategies (those related to the Regional Network Strategy) are based on the belief that change at the local level is about relationships, and that access at the local level requires building of respect and trust. They also note that this assumption about school improvement is new for NYSED and is not fully shared across all departments. District Superintendents spoke of the heightened importance of relationships to their work in a context where there are inadequate or outdated formal structures. They also articulated the importance of trust and relationships in bringing out the kinds of change sought to improve schools identified as low performing.

Strategies and approaches to school improvement

Shared emphasis on capacity building, including using capacity-building strategies. The mission of the OSI is “to build the capacity of schools and districts in need of improvement to help their students reach the New York State Learning Standards and close the documented gaps in student performance” (Butterworth, 2004). Similarly, a central objective of the Regional Network Strategy is to build the capacity of schools and districts identified by the state accountability system to sustain organizational performance through ongoing, data-driven planning and action. Given this overlapping purpose and objective, it is not surprising that the regional network partners and OSI state that they do utilize capacity building strategies.

RSSCs reported that their overarching mandate is to build the capacity of schools and districts with which they work. Student Support Services staff members see themselves as building capacity in schools and districts to provide supportive learning environments for students—networks of academic and personal supports—that enable all students to become successful, contributing, and compassionate adults. SETRC seeks to build the internal capacity of its clients, and BETAC staff report that they have begun to integrate capacity building into their work as an outcome of the regional network strategy professional development. OSI staff members also report that their role is to build the capacity of schools and districts to increase student success.

There is general agreement that capacity building requires strategies such as job-embedded professional development and approaches such as coaching and mentoring. There is also general agreement that it requires prolonged work with a client and cannot be accomplished through short-term interventions. SSS staff members perceive that an approach whereby they ask thoughtful and provocative questions is integral to building capacity. RSSC respondents also report using inquiry-based strategies to engage teachers and administrators in discussion on their practice, data, planning, and other topics. Similarly, SETRC staff members report use of this strategy to influence their clients while letting them choose their own course of action so that they are invested in it. There appears, however, to be no single understanding of what comprises capacity building either within a single network or organization, or across networks. A single definition is not appropriate at this time as there is inadequate knowledge within the component

organizations of the best strategies for building capacity in districts and schools. On the other hand, continued exploration of this topic and its integration into evaluations of the work of both the system as a whole and its elements will be an important aspect of enhancing the coherence of the regional network strategy.

Different needs assessment and planning strategies. The regional network partners, OSI, and VESID utilize needs assessment processes and engage in planning to guide and structure their work. Informal regional needs assessments, as well as regional planning meetings, are increasingly being used to orient and guide the regional network partner's work with client schools and districts. At the district- and school-level, the network partners consistently utilize needs assessment and plan writing as essential elements of their change efforts. Within this overall commonality, we were unable to determine the extent to which there are truly common approaches across partners in the network strategy. Needs assessments are defined differently as “root cause analyses” or “causal analyses” or just as needs assessments, and there appears to be some difference in how these are conducted.

Overall, some networks have more defined processes than others. SETRC, for instance, has a well-defined model for conducting needs assessment, and utilizes the comprehensive school personnel development plan to guide their planning process. SETRC staff members report that their strategy has changed over time, and they have increasingly sought to focus on what is needed in a school as opposed to what its staff may want for professional development from SETRC. RSSCs also have defined processes, though these differ from one region to another. They report using a flexible, contextualized approach to entry, assessment, and planning. As previously mentioned, much of what SSS does depends upon initiative funding, and initial entry into a school takes many forms. BETACs use multiple approaches to needs assessments, including reviews of reports submitted to the Office of Bilingual Education (OBE) by schools and districts. They also have a common process that pertains to interventions with districts out of compliance with the legislation for which they are responsible. OSI staff members working in schools do not appear to have a consistent approach to engaging with schools. Some staff members enter with another network, some as members of a larger team, and some work independently, either in the same schools or with different schools than other networks.

The difference in needs assessment processes and planning is likely a function of the multiple planning requirements facing schools. The regional network partners report that they work with schools on different plans—based on different templates and redundant criteria or categories—that address a variety of reporting and accountability requirements. Many individuals within the different network partners were unable to describe how (if at all) the different plans were integrated into a single school improvement plan¹². RSSC and SETRC representatives tended to be best able to describe how all of the plans fit together, though they, too, expressed dissatisfaction with the sheer number of plans. RSSC staff described situations in which schools would complete a detailed planning process and develop a working plan but then be required to submit another (and somewhat different) formal plan for the following school year. There is a clear lack of coherence in the planning process as it relates to school improvement plans and how the networks work together around school improvement; however,

¹² Some experienced staff, in particular those who had worked for more than one network partner, were able to explain how the different plans interrelated. However, these individuals were the exception rather than the rule.

the lack of coherence is more of a function of statewide reporting requirements than it is a result of the Regional Network Strategy. Asking and requiring networks to work together has highlighted historical and bureaucratic mechanisms (e.g., planning and reporting requirements) that are not aligned.

Shared emphasis on using data. All network partners seek to utilize data as a way to move client discussions from exchanges of opinion to discussions of actionable facts. SETRC staff members based their interventions on Key Performance Indicators and seek to engage schools and districts in discussion about data from which they can create plans. RSSCs also seek to utilize data to engage clients in conversations. These may initially be data from state assessments but may also extend to other data generated within the school. RSSCs and SETRC each describe their use of data as more than simply a tool to identify particular interventions. In addition to being able to pinpoint areas of need, these networks facilitate a discussion around data—what the data show, what questions stem from an analysis of data—as a means to enhance understanding among teachers that improvement is possible and that teachers and administrators do have the ability to contribute to improvement. SSS staff members conduct needs assessments and use the data to help schools create plans. OSI staff members utilize data for initial targeting of schools, and BETAC staff members are looking forward to more accurate data on LEP student achievement.

Working simultaneously with schools and districts. The network partners seek to work simultaneously with personnel at multiple levels: teachers to influence instruction, school leadership, and district staff. A multi-level and systemic approach reflects a general understanding among the networks that sustainable school improvement requires using multiple leverage points and must address the core of teaching and learning in addition to organizational and cultural issues.

SSS, SETRC, and BETAC staff members have always worked with teachers, and SSS occasionally works with students, finding that they can be a significant influence for change in a school. RSSCs initially worked at the whole school level but are finding that for instructional practice to change, they need to address classroom practice, either directly or with the assistance of other organizations such as BOCES. In the words of a District Superintendent, interventions that transform instruction are “in the long term essential to the changes that are necessary.”

Depending on the situation, the regional networks also seek to work at the whole school-level and sometimes at the district-level. Whole school interventions are usually required to create the structural and cultural elements with the school that support and encourage teachers and administrators to engage in reflective learning. Networks work with districts both to align their interventions with district policy and actions and to influence district policy and build district-level capacity.

Roles and responsibilities, including how groups interact with each other

Shifting roles and lack of clarity. Shifting roles resulting from the requirements of NCLB and implementation of the regional network strategy has led members of the statewide and regional networks to be unclear about their role in the system, including their relationships with each

other related to work with client districts and schools. As a result, regional network partners have struggled to define their role in relation to each other and to decide jointly how they will work together. Some regions have developed protocols that clarify their regional roles and expectations for planning and communicating, while other regions are only just beginning to develop such processes. State-level officials demonstrate similar confusion, with much of their uncertainty stemming from sometimes conflicting directives that arise from different departments in NYSED.

The RSSCs and SETRC have experienced the least shift in service roles as the clients they are to target are clearly defined. Each, however, was initially unclear about its role in initiating regional collaboration among state-funded networks. As the regional network strategy has unfolded, the role of the RSSCs as regional convener has been clarified and is now better understood, if not wholly accepted, by the regional networks. BETAC has a well-defined mission to serve English Language Learners, but is unclear about how much of its energies to devote to identified schools, and how to integrate services with those of other networks. SSS reports that its overall purpose is changing as its staff are being asked to move from health-related to general education issues, and they are also dealing with the problems of allocation of resources between long-term clients and schools identified for support under NCLB. They say that there is no uniform understanding of what they do.

At the state-level, some members of OSI perceive that they have clear roles and responsibilities within the Regional Network Strategy, while other staff members are concerned about how the regional network strategy will develop over time, and what this will really mean for their work. Others do not understand how their work fits into the Regional Network Strategy. Some OSI staff also question the relationship between the (Big Four) Partnership Agreements and the Regional Network Strategy. The ability of NYSED to provide coherent support to the regional network partners is also limited by the wide variance in how NYSED staff (including OSI, Title I, and VESID staff) interact with the regional networks, districts and schools. From the perspective of the regional network partners, the roles of NYSED staff tend to oscillate between monitoring and support, depending on the issue (e.g., SURR visits) being addressed as well as the individual expertise of the NYSED staff. Confusion and potential problems arise when NYSED staff members blur the lines—and their role—between monitoring and support, which can disrupt and negatively impact the ability of the regional network partners to provide credible support and assistance.

The District Superintendents have a clear mandate from the Commissioner to work with identified schools. Their BOCES house many of the network offices, and some District Superintendents have seen one of their roles to be to work to create a coherent approach to supporting schools across multiple service providers, including those of BOCES. They have done so through strategies such as co-location of networks, placing them within a single department, or experimenting with a comprehensive review of the needs of all their districts. In instances where networks housed within a BOCES serve cities in which the BOCES is specifically barred from working, the role of the District Superintendent is less clear. District Superintendents are seeking changes to current legislation to clarify and expand their role in the major urban districts. Finally, District Superintendents perceive a conflict between their roles as managers of networks under their charge and the predominant orientation of those networks

towards NYSED, which in their view tends to limit the coherence of regional services. An example is the RSSC Executive Committees, which in fact have little executive role because that is assumed by NYSED. The District Superintendents see the BOCES system as an enormous, yet inadequately utilized, resource to the overall regional network strategy.

Monitoring role. There is an ever-present but different monitoring role for all elements of the system. This role is sometimes seen as an inhibitor to providing support to schools and districts. Playing the role of a monitor, and having to report on compliance to state- or federal-regulations, results in more guarded relationships with district and school staff than one in which the sole purpose is to assist the client and maintain confidences. This tends to result in less access to information and candid confidences than is ideal for effectively facilitating change. While some networks report that they are better able to play a dual monitoring/support role (e.g., SETRC) than others, all of the networks agree that monitoring and support roles and activities should be clearly delineated and, in some instances, for only NYSED representatives to carry out the monitoring function. The regional networks recognize that monitoring, including imposing pressure and demands upon districts and schools when necessary, plays a critical role the state's overall accountability system; however, they feel that monitoring should not impede the ability of the network partners to provide effective support and assistance.

OSI staff members have the most clearly defined monitoring role of any of the system elements that we studied. This extends to monitoring of school and district plans, applications and grants; monitoring of the two networks for which OSI is responsible; and monitoring of the overall Regional Network Strategy. SETRCs, BETACs and SSS also report that they have a monitoring role. SETRC staff members report that they do not see their monitoring role as significantly inhibiting their work. In fact, some staff members would like more “teeth” in order to be able to enforce change. BETAC see the monitoring role as belonging to NYSED, which does not have the resources to fully carry out this role. As a result a significant amount of their staff time is committed to monitoring of applications and reports and ensuring that districts out of compliance take steps to meet the regulations. One half of respondents from SSS report that their jobs involve monitoring and that this role has significantly increased over the past year. On the one hand, this provides access to schools with which they had not previously worked. On the other hand, the monitoring role can create conflicts as they work with schools to help them create safety plans and also inform them whether or not they are in compliance. RSSCs play a lesser monitoring role but also see themselves as a buffer and translator of federal and state policy. They are an extension of the state and are working with schools that are required to take actions under federal law and state policy. At times, RSSCs are therefore required to play a role that extends beyond support. Managing this role requires sensitivity and skill.

Leadership Interactions

Increasing and more comprehensive interaction. Over the course of this study, we have observed and documented increasing regional interaction between and among elements of the system. Increased regional interaction is a central element of the Regional Network Strategy, so it is not surprising that the network partners are developing processes to meet on a regular basis and plan their work together. As noted throughout the cross-group findings, increased interaction

revealed a number of barriers (e.g., different theories of change, different ways of working with schools) that reduced the initial coherence of the regional network strategy; however, opportunities to develop new and more strategic ways of supporting schools emerged from increased interaction among the network partners (and within NYSED). Participation in the NYSED Professional Development Initiative and the sheer necessity of having to leverage resources to meet the needs of a growing number of schools has led to more comprehensive and strategic interaction. While increased interaction does not by default lead to increased alignment and coherence, vertical and horizontal coordination and communication within and across all levels of the system (e.g., the regional networks, the District Superintendents, and NYSED) is a prerequisite to improved coherence.

Initial coordination and collaboration among regional networks was largely based on geographical proximity and pre-existing relationships. A number of RSSC staff members, for instance, had previously worked for SETRC and were able to build upon their prior connections when coordinating efforts across partner networks. In addition, RSSCs received funding from VESID, and consequently coordination between these two networks was more common than between others. The role of the RSSC as coordinator at the regional level was not commonly understood by all state-funded networks, but is becoming increasingly recognized. Although there has been some concern expressed by BETAC and SSS staff that the demands of the Regional Network Strategy are sometimes incompatible with other roles they have to play and that coordination uses limited resources, respondents to our questions generally expressed enthusiasm for increased interaction and the improved knowledge of other networks that has resulted from the common professional development.

Regional structures and protocols that support coordination and collaboration are being put into place, though at different rates in different regions. Development of these structures appears to require a significant commitment of time and resources. Among other things, it requires networks to understand one another. All networks perceive that other networks do not fully understand their purposes, approaches and skill bases, but they also perceive that they do understand other networks. Both District Superintendents and OSI staff point out that the networks have a long history of working independently. OSI staff members wonder if the networks will be able to overcome this history and the “turf wars” it has engendered.

Increasing state-level coherence. NYSED, and in particular the Office of School Improvement, perceives that one of its roles is to increase coherence at the state level, and it has taken action in that direction. There has been increased interaction between teams within OSI to plan work, but there is little regular cross-office activity and systems have not been put in place to promote offices working together. In addition to the overarching policy documents and explanations of the Regional Network Strategy, OSI staff members expressed a need for a more specific and concrete plan for implementation that would include clear reporting lines for different offices and the field and defined desired results and accountability at the school-, district-, network- and state-levels.

OSI staff members have been increasingly working with VESID, and seeking to coordinate at a policy level how they should best manage the overlap between districts targeted by VESID (both SETRC and SEQA) and schools and districts identified under NCLB. They have provided

training to VESID staff on the RSSC status reports. Network partner staff members, on the other hand, report that past lack of coordination between OSI and VESID has negatively impacted their ability to coordinate at the regional level. Finally, OSI staff members find themselves unable to influence offices outside NYSED that have a significant impact on the Regional Network Strategy.

The interaction between OSI and the OBE is also increasing, although it is much less visible than that documented between OSI and VESID. BETAC field representatives have received mixed messages about participating in the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative. Additionally, our documentation of state-level interactions did not find significant interaction between OSI and the Title I office. Both offices are located in the department of Elementary, Secondary, and Continuing Education led by Deputy Commissioner Kadamus, so there is clearly an organizational link between offices. Since our study was not designed to capture data from state-level departments not formally engaged in the Regional Network Strategy, we are not able to discuss other ways in which OSI and Title I coordinate their efforts. Given these limitations, we still note that a lack of coordination between OSI and Title I may have implications for the continued coherence and stability of the Regional Network Strategy and ongoing school improvement efforts. For instance, if the Title I office and OSI fail to coordinate support strategies and more intensive corrective action strategies (e.g., district corrective action), the plans developed by districts and schools (with the support of the RSSCs) may not align with the corrective actions suggested or required by the Title I office.

Expanding but limited communication between NYSED and regions. Efforts to increase communication and coordination between NYSED and the regions increased during the first two years of the Regional Network Strategy. The NYSED Regional Professional Development initiative is the most visible evidence of NYSED efforts to increase communication with the regions and the recent and ongoing efforts to develop a School Information Management system¹³ to capture all contacts with districts and schools has the potential to support coordination between NYSED and the regions. Its implementation beyond NYSED has been hampered by lack of funds however, and the mechanisms put in place by NYSED still do not provide enough opportunities for ongoing feedback and information transfer. Strategic and meaningful two-way interaction is needed for effective policy-making and efficient functioning of all the organizations involved in the Regional Network Strategy.

RSSC staff members expressed concern that they are not consulted in the design of initiatives, even when they will have a significant impact on how they will carry out their work. Directives, for instance, sometimes limit their capacity to utilize research and their emerging experience in carrying out tasks. Student Support Services staff members expressed the belief that some members of OSI do not fully understand what they do in schools, and that state-level decisions about their role reflect those misperceptions. District Superintendents expressed the view that although they, as well as networks, are provided with directives, there is inadequate two-way communication between the regions and NYSED. A result is that members of different elements of the system do not learn from each other and policy decisions are perceived to be inadequately informed by the field, and consequently not as effective as they could otherwise be. SETRC staff

¹³ The School Information Management system is a process whereby all contacts with a district or school are entered into a database that will be accessible to SED offices and the regional network partners.

members expressed the perception that VESID is generally supportive of their work and the way in which they work.

All networks expressed concern that the reporting systems with which they provide feedback to NYSED do not adequately reflect their work. Although positive about its intent, SETRC staff question the worth and validity of their reporting system, and also the resources that the system requires. Student Support Services representatives stated that the data requested from the field by NYSED does not capture the work that they do, and RSSC staff expressed a similar opinion. In short, inadequate interactive feedback systems are perceived as limiting the effectiveness of all elements of the system. A developing example of an alternative to top-down policy development is the involvement of all participants in the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative in the development of draft protocols for working together in the regions.

SECTION IV

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis of New York's Regional Network Strategy is based on the premise that a coherent and aligned system of support is necessary if New York State is to provide effective and efficient support to districts and schools identified for improvement. New York's regional strategy relies on re-aligning existing resources and incorporating organizations that have had different visions or missions. In the past the organizations have tended to work in isolation. As a result, the regional approach brings together organizations that by definition initially lack coherence. However, New York's strategy carries great potential to provide systemic support by tapping into a large body of existing expertise and integrating resources and programs around the common goal of reducing the achievement gap

The implementation of the Regional Network Strategy has moved participants in a positive direction. Our analysis illustrates that different elements of the system do have much in common, such as an emphasis on data-based decision making, and an understanding of the importance of relationship building. These common elements jointly provide a solid base upon which to build a coherent system of support. There is evidence of increased cooperation in all regions and the regional networks are developing ways to systematically work together and share information.

While the Regional Network Strategy has moved participants towards cooperation and more coherent services, our analysis also identified a number of areas in which there is a lack of coherence and alignment among players in the system. Many of the issues that contribute to this lack of coherence are based on longstanding institutional ways of working and require complex, adaptive solutions. Based on our analysis, we make the following recommendations as components of an interlocking strategy designed to create a more tightly coupled system of support. The first two recommendations call upon the joint action of NYSED and the regional network partners. The second set of recommendations call for action to be led by the regional network partners, and the last three recommendations suggest actions that are within NYSED's purview to implement.

Table 6. Policy Recommendations for the development of the Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement

Systemic Action	1. Utilize the expertise of the network partners to continually develop and evaluate regionally based whole school improvement processes. 2. Continue the statewide learning community of professional members of the support system for schools identified as low performing through ongoing professional development.
Regional Action	3. Develop regional criteria and processes to identify schools targeted by the Regional Network Strategy. 4. Continue to explore and clarify the theories of action of the different partners involved in the Regional Network Strategy. 5. Clearly define and communicate the criteria, expectations and roles under which the different partners in the Regional Network Strategy engage and work with schools and districts.
NYSED Action	6. Continue to integrate and align the policies and strategies of different divisions and offices within NYSED. 7. Formally recognize the importance of relationships in school improvement. 8. Define and communicate the multiple roles of the State Education Department in relation to the implementation of the Regional Network Strategy.

1) Utilize the expertise of the network partners to continually develop and evaluate regionally based school improvement processes that address the needs of different types of schools and account for regional and contextual variance. The Regional Network Strategy is by definition regional in nature, and our study has documented the existing variance in strategies and approaches used across regions. Given the extant regional differences and the fact that there is not a single statewide planning process and approach to school improvement, we suggest that RSSCs and partner networks within the six rest-of-state RSSC regions continue and extend their ongoing coordination by formally developing and documenting a joint approach to school improvement in shared identified schools. A coherent and unifying framework for school improvement is a prerequisite of sustainable school improvement. It is important that the regions have such a framework to guide their work.

The support strategies used and under development in each region may ultimately run the gamut from an intensive whole-school reform effort similar in scope to approaches used by schools engaged in the federal Comprehensive School Reform program, to less intensive interventions based on the need of each school. Regardless of its scope, we suggest that each region, through the coordination of the RSSCs or District Superintendents, develop a unifying framework for school improvement that will increase the rigor and alignment of support strategies and interactions with identified schools. Developing a regional model for school improvement has the added benefit of moving beyond network specific needs assessment and planning processes towards the development and use of processes that are inclusive of the skills, knowledge and expertise held by the different networks.

The current rationale for the Regional Network Strategy is that “Regional networks bring services closer to schools and draw upon local experts who are familiar with the political and school context. Regional networks may provide general assistance or more specialized assistance to schools and districts in need of improvement” (Kadamus, 2003). Our study suggests that if the Regional Network Strategy is to be effective in improving student achievement, regional networks must leverage specific content knowledge toward the development of a coordinated and coherent system of support that can be documented, evaluated and shared with others. To support this effort, we suggest that NYSED develop procedures and assume supportive roles that will help increase the rigor of regional approaches to school improvement, while preserving the autonomy of the regional networks and districts as the active “doers” and facilitators of school improvement in districts and schools. To increase the rigor of regional support activities, we suggest that NYSED: (1) continue to provide accurate and pertinent data; (2) reduce the number of plans that districts and schools are required to complete; and (3) provide evaluation and documentation assistance or resources to the regional networks as needed to document accurately the development of regional approaches to school improvement.

2) Continue the statewide learning community of professional members of the support system for schools identified as low performing through ongoing professional development in order to build on the foundation created over the first two years of the NYSED professional development initiative. The statewide professional development was a bold attempt to move beyond business as usual. It initially increased anxiety and tension among a number of stakeholder groups. It has subsequently increased communication between regional and statewide groups and created channels for communication up and down the system. It has created

increased coordination at multiple levels of the system as evidenced by joint presentation by state level leadership and increased cooperation within regions. It has, in the words of participants, helped to “create a common language” across participating groups, and it has provided a form through which NYSED has been able to harness the expertise and advice of the field. We perceive that the regular quarterly sessions have created pressure and a subsequent momentum within both NYSED and at the regional level that has moved the regional network strategy at a pace that would otherwise not have been achievable. Finally, a large majority of participants report that they value sessions and are learning from them.

Forthcoming statewide protocols on engagement, needs assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation will provide opportunities for substantive interaction between regions within the learning community as they use the protocols as guides in creating coherent regional strategies for working with schools and districts. We have also suggested additional topics to be addressed in other recommendations. These include articulating and refining theories of action and change, enhancing understanding of capacity building and strategies that bring it about, and having regions educate each other on what they are learning about working with schools and districts from continuous development and evaluation of their school improvement processes. We anticipate that there will be additional themes arising both from NYSED initiatives and the needs of the field. The current form of the learning community will likely shift as it continues to grow in the coming years. To support its development, it will be useful to consider what the learning community may look like in the future and how to best support its growth. This might comprise fewer statewide meetings, a greater emphasis on regional meetings, and development of a representative system for generating knowledge up and down the system.

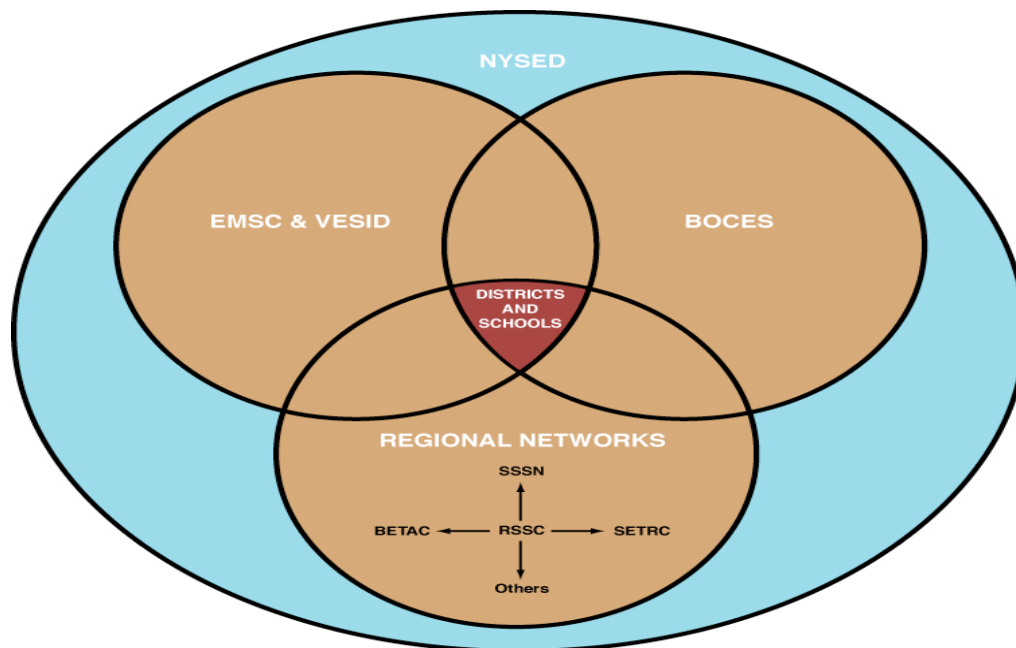
3) Develop regional criteria and processes to identify schools targeted by the Regional Network Strategy, so that the process of entry and engagement into targeted schools is strategic, includes key stakeholders, and integrates the role of the district. Our analysis found that because each network in the Regional Network Strategy has somewhat different criteria for identifying the schools they are expected to serve, there is a lack of clarity over which schools are to be included in the Regional Network Strategy. As the state and the regional networks develop and field test the statewide protocols, it will be increasingly important for the regional network partners to (a) define the subset of schools that will receive support through the Regional Network Strategy and (b) consider which additional partners should be included in discussions about, and work with, the identified schools.

The larger set of schools eligible for Regional Network Strategy support is defined by NCLB and VESID criteria. We recommend that in addition to using the state defined criteria (NCLB and VESID) to identify the larger set of schools, the regional network partners (including the District Superintendents) jointly develop additional criteria to be used on a regional basis to identify the subset of schools that will receive support through the Regional Network Strategy¹⁴. The subset of schools are those in which the regional network partners will jointly decide how to work and in which they will agree to use the statewide protocols to guide their support efforts. Figure 3

¹⁴ The ongoing effort involving the District Superintendents, the Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner to develop policies and a structure for addressing the full continuum of schools that require assistance will help to clarify issues related to the type and level of support to be provided to all districts and schools, not just those identified for improvement or corrective action through the state’s accountability system.

provides a way to conceptualize the larger set of responsibilities and support provided by NYSED and where the different elements of NYSED (e.g., BOCES, EMSC and VESID, and the regional networks) intersect in a subset of schools that are identified for improvement and support through the Regional Network Strategy.

Figure 3. Regional Network Strategy – Intersection of NYSED Departments and Regional Networks in Identified Districts and Schools



There are a number of regions that have begun to develop processes to jointly identify targeted schools and ensure that appropriate networks participate in discussions regarding these schools. Much of this expertise has been incorporated into the current iteration of the engagement protocol (one of the five statewide protocols). As such, our recommendation builds upon the engagement protocol. We suggest that as regions utilize the engagement protocol to develop processes for entry and engagement, that they consider using additional criteria that address issues such as leadership stability, teacher turnover, staff willingness to engage in school improvement efforts, and organizational capacity. These concepts capture many of the characteristics of schools that are not measured by state assessments but that directly impact the ability of external providers to provide meaningful assistance.

There are a number of ways that the regional networks can incorporate the use of additional criteria during the selection process, some of which are already being used in regions across the state. For instance, the RSSCs could facilitate a joint meeting of the regional networks and district representatives (when appropriate) and use agreed upon criteria (as well as their collective knowledge and experience) to select the schools to receive support. Another alternative might be to jointly develop a school application process that requires that identified schools apply to receive support through the Regional Network Strategy.

4) Continue to explore and clarify the theories of action (Argyris & Schon, 1978) of the different partners involved in the regional network strategy. One of our central findings is that although there are a few overarching similarities in the approaches used by the regional networks and in SED, they have different and sometimes opposing theories of action, and theories of change in particular. In the context of school improvement, theories of action explicitly address beliefs about how students learn, how schools should be organized and managed, and how improvement and innovation can take place in schools (Hatch, 2000). In the context of the Regional Network Strategy, theories of action address how the network partners most effectively function as a whole system. We recommend that the regional networks continue to explore and clarify their theories of action with the goal of developing a joint (e.g., inclusive of the regional network partners in a given region) theory of action that provides a way to organize their work with targeted districts and schools.

We do not anticipate that the Regional Network Strategy needs to operate from a single theory of action and change, and there is no single theory that we could recommend. We do recommend that all the theories contain common elements. They should, for instance, explicate strategies for building capacity in schools and districts. Articulating theories of action might best take place through a NYSED Regional professional development activity in which networks and NYSED groups are expected to define the principles from which they operate, the research in change and learning on which those are based, and to identify the specific strategies they used carry out those strategies. It would then be possible to determine where there were fits and where there were not, and begin to identify internal or inter-partner conflicts that require resolution.

Raising this issue to a conscious level and dealing with it directly can be supported by and build upon the current statewide protocol work. However, because the protocols are organized according to a planning process (e.g., engagement, needs assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation) instead of broader school improvement goals (e.g., capacity building, instructional and organizational coherence), they are unlikely to impact the development of an explicit theory of change in a significant way. Additionally, the statewide effort to develop a streamlined performance-based planning system is a potential means to integrate elements of a theory of change into planning documents. When a single (or streamlined) planning process is developed, it can be primed with key elements to guide districts and schools as they plan school improvement efforts.

5) Clearly define and communicate the criteria, expectations and roles under which the different partners in the Regional Network Strategy engage and work with schools and districts. Our study found that the conditions under which different partners in the Regional Network Strategy engage with clients often differ both by partner and by task. One factor in this difference is the authority of the provider relative to the client. We suggest that the NYSED offices involved in the Regional Network Strategy continue to explore and reflect on these relationship and authority dynamics. By making clear decisions about where authority lies and developing a strategy that utilizes staff in complementary but different roles, NYSED will be better able to sharpen its policies, diminish conflict in the field stemming from role confusion, and provide for increasingly precise conversations about change strategies within the learning community. Once decisions are made about the appropriate authority of the different network providers and NYSED staff, it will be important to communicate these roles with identified

districts and schools, including clarifying NYSED's expectations and criteria for when districts and schools are required to receive support through the Regional Network Strategy, as well as situations in which this decision is left to the discretion of the district or school¹⁵.

Communicating and clarifying expectations is particularly important in the context of a high-stakes accountability system—a system in which relationships and trust are essential for building capacity in low-performing schools. Unclear expectations about the role of external agents in client districts and schools can erode the peer-based and trusting relationships that support capacity building. External service providers that lose their credibility as peers (e.g. having insider status) are perceived as outside experts and subsequently develop a client-based or “healer-patient” (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971) relationship that tends to be detrimental to a capacity-building strategy and devolve to “capacity substitution” (Finnigan & O'Day, p 38).

In a human relationship one subject confronts another. Each relates to the other as a subject. In a relationship in which power is a dominant factor, one subject tries to make an object out of the other, while the latter subjects himself to the former. That is, the object can now be manipulated by the subject for his own purposes. Such a situation enhances the subject's sense of his own importance and relieves the object of responsibility.

One way in which this may play out is through giving technical assistance staff a monitoring role. The impact of a monitoring role on the dynamics between client and regional network partner depends upon the extent to which the original relationship is voluntary. If it is determined that it should be voluntary, superimposing monitoring functions color the relationship by introducing dynamics that diminish openness and the possibility of “tight” relationships (Cohen & Ball, 1999, p. 24) and result in a more loosely coupled system. In summary, we do not pretend to know the balance of authority that will be most effective in New York. We do perceive that clear and open exploration of these issues, probably through the ongoing network professional development, will offer opportunities to clarify policy and language, for diminishing long-term conflict, and increasing coherence in the system.

6) Continue to integrate and align the policies and strategies of different divisions and offices within NYSED so that they positively influence the work of the regional networks, including district and school improvement efforts. NYSED depends on federal programs for the majority of its funding and for the money with which it funds state networks (other than the Teacher Centers). These programs tend to emerge from different legislation and are the outcomes of political (and thus not always strategic or rational) processes. In addition to differences in federal strategies, the funding sources are often not directly aligned with New York state policy, and so create tension between and among those who administer them. Different divisions and offices within NYSED have tended to resolve this tension by working relatively independently,

¹⁵ For instance, districts and schools could be granted different levels of flexibility based on their NCLB accountability status. Identified schools within a district identified for improvement or corrective action could be required to receive Regional Network Strategy services. Districts that have not been identified for corrective action and that do have the capacity to support their schools would be granted discretion as to their involvement in the Regional Network Strategy, including whether or not to have the RSSCs fully engage with their identified schools. In this way, districts that have developed a district-wide school improvement strategy can continue with their own process and call upon Regional Network Strategy resources when they align with district strategy.

and focusing on the programs related to the categorical funding for which they are responsible rather than the implementation of a coherent state approach to supporting schools and districts. Similarly, staff members of networks with more than one funding source often find themselves pulled between meeting the expectations of various funding streams and pursuing a cohesive approach with the districts and schools they serve.

Cross-funding of the RSSCs by OSI and VESID and the expanding cooperation between OSI and VESID represent a departure from this practice of working independently, and the presence of their respective leaders on the same stage with a joint message is welcomed by the field. In the regions, there is evidence of increased coordination and partnering among networks that historically have not worked together for school improvement. The increased coordination and alignment stems in part from the incorporation of the Design Principles for Technical Assistance Centers into the contracts and work plans for the regional network partners. The increased partnering of networks is an important and successful accomplishment and is expected to continue as other state-funded networks (e.g., BETAC and SSSN) competitively apply for contracts that include the Design Principles and focus on school improvement. However, there remain important funding sources that are not integrated into the Regional Network Strategy. Without continued efforts to align policies within NYSED, as well as to strategically integrate current and new federal policies into the Regional Network Strategy, the increased cooperation between regional network partners in the field will remain fragile.

We recommend that NYSED work towards creating a single cross-division strategic plan based on existing Board of Regents policy documents for implementing its Regional Network Strategy. In addition, we recommend that the state consider reflecting on the following two questions while making decisions about how to implement and integrate federal and state education policy directly related to the Regional Network Strategy and identified districts and schools:

- How will this policy or program affect the ability of the Regional Network Strategy to continue its efforts to increase capacity in targeted schools?
- Will the implementation of this policy/program have a negative impact on the overall coherence and alignment of the roles, purposes, and strategies used by the RSSCs and network partners?

While we realize that state-level decision making regarding policies is not predictable and is often based on issues out of the control of those asked to implement policy decisions, these questions could be used to frame the discussion when it is possible to do so.

7) Formally recognize the importance of relationships in school improvement, both in policy guidance and development and in indicators of success. Our study found that although some OSI respondents said that paying attention to relationships was new to them, participants from all levels of the system informally recognize and stress the importance of relationships in effecting change. Without trusting and respectful relationships, it is nearly impossible to work on the hard issues related to school improvement and gain the support of leaders at all levels of the system. To formalize the importance of relationships, we suggest crafting policy so that it accounts for the time and effort needed to build trusting relationships. We suggest routinely building dialogue and consultation with field representatives into Regional Network Strategy policy development

so that NYSED staff can use a field perspective as it crafts policy and programs. We suggest exploring ways to measure and explicitly acknowledge relationship building as a contributing factor in successful district and school improvement, and as an indicator of successful engagement and implementation. Formally recognizing the interaction among individuals across the tiers of the multi-level educational system (not just between a principal and her staff, but also between SED staff and regional networks or District Superintendents) will highlight the qualities and characteristics of leaders' interactions as they relate to systemic change and improvement, rather than isolated successes based on a particularly charismatic leader.

8) Define and communicate the multiple roles of the State Education Department in relation to the implementation of the Regional Network Strategy, including district and school improvement efforts. Our findings illustrate the rapidly shifting roles and a lack of role clarity among all levels of the system. Much work has been undertaken to clarify roles, as evident in the continued involvement of many of the networks in the NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative and increased coordination of work within regions. The visible cooperation between EMSC and VESID, including the development of integrated EMSC/VESID policies guiding the work of the their respective networks, has been eagerly praised by network partners and continued cooperation is critical to the ultimate success of the Regional Network Strategy.

Although the integration of EMSC and VESID has and will continue to contribute to coherence across the system, we suggest that NYSED leaders and staff reconsider the role that they play in school and district improvement, especially as it relates to how they directly relate with districts, and especially with individual schools, targeted through the Regional Network Strategy. Specifically, we suggest that members of the Office of School Improvement minimize their individual contact with identified schools, except when carrying out required duties in SURR schools or when specifically invited into a school by one of the partner networks and in conjunction with the overall strategy as decided upon by the regional network partners. In these instances, the role of the state official will be defined and agreed upon prior to engaging with a school so as to reduce the potential for confusion or questions that could hinder the oftentimes fragile work of the regional networks. Any contact state officials have with districts or schools must reinforce the legitimacy of the Regional Network Strategy and partner networks.

Instead of concentrating limited staff resources on direct work with schools, we suggest that NYSED carefully frame its role to focus on those aspects of the Regional Network Strategy that only it can manage. Fullan states, "The role of the center is to set up the conditions for cultivating and sorting the wisdom of the system" (2004, p. 7). The NYSED role may also include topics identified as a policy role by Elmore (2000, p. 22) such as setting targets, monitoring performance, buffering the networks from intrusion, as well as identifying resources and working with others in NYSED. Further, we suggest that NYSED provide evaluation and documentation support to the RSSCs and partner networks towards the development and refinement of strategies, tools, and best practices used with districts and schools.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOLS

Leadership in Complex Environments – New York’s Regional Network Strategy Focus Group Overview and Purpose

The purpose of our visit is to learn about how your network works with targeted schools and districts, including how you work with other organizations to support improvement efforts in targeted schools. Further, we want to engage in a discussion with you and your staff about how effective these strategies and partnerships have been as well as identify particular challenges or issues that have influenced your effectiveness in targeted schools and districts. The information gathered during this focus group will inform New York State’s development of a coordinated approach and strategy intended to build the capacity of identified districts and schools. The LAB will collect and summarize this information from each of the network focus groups and develop a summary report, with your input, intended to support the efforts of the New York State Department of Education and to disseminate to a broader national audience.

Specifically, the purposes of the site visit are to:

- Identify and document the specific strategies and approaches used by your network,
- Document the roles, assumptions and rationale guiding the use of strategies and approaches, and
- Explore how networks and NYSED are implementing and/or adapting the state’s regional network strategy.

Our questions focus primarily on three main areas:

- (1) *Roles and responsibilities* – the roles that you and your network have in supporting districts and schools, including conflicts among roles.
- (2) *Support Strategies* – the various approaches and strategies that you use with schools and districts, including the rationale and assumptions guiding your use of specific strategies.
- (3) *Leadership Interactions* – how you have worked with other agencies and organizations to support the efforts of targeted schools and districts.

In addition, we would like to offer this time as an opportunity for you to reflect on your impact of the state’s professional development initiative and how your involvement in the initiative is influencing your work.

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

Network Focus Group Protocol Questions and Instructions (Brief Version)

Part I (15 minutes)

A) Roles and Responsibilities

- (1) Describe the roles that you/members of your organization perform in working with schools or districts identified as for improvement. Reference activity sheet #1.
- (2) Do you experience any conflicts between these roles? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Part II (40 minutes)

B) Strategies and approaches to school improvement

- (1) What is your approach to working with schools and districts?
- (2) How do you go about working with schools/districts that have been identified as for improvement? (*Facilitator uses prompts as necessary*)

C) Purpose, Rationale and Assumptions

- (1) What is your thinking and reasoning behind the approach(es) you have described? (*Facilitator uses prompts as necessary*)

Part III (40 minutes)

D) Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system) (40 minutes)

- (1) In your region, your network works in many of the same schools or districts as do other regional networks in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC).
 - a. With which of these networks do you work most?
 - b. Describe how, or in what ways you work together?
 - c. What are the reasons that cause you to work most with these ones? (*Facilitator uses prompts as necessary*)
 - d. With which networks/organizations do you work least?
 - e. What are the reasons that you work less with these networks?
- (2) An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement (OSI) and VESID.
 - a) Provide an example of a time when OSI and VESID worked effectively with you to support schools and districts identified for improvement. (*Facilitator uses prompts as necessary*)
 - b. Talk about a time when you and OSI/VESID did not work effectively together. (*Facilitator uses prompts as necessary*)

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

- (3) Do you experience any conflicts between these groups or roles that you are expected to play within the support network? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Part IV (20 minutes)

E) Evaluation of Impact

- (1) If your network were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with other elements in the network?

Part V (10 minutes)

F) Change Process

(Facilitator hands out Activity Sheet #2 and then asks the participants to respond to questions #1 and #2)

- (1) Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.
- (2) Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

Protocol for Network Focus Groups (Detailed Version)

A. Roles and Responsibilities (15 minutes)

Facilitator note: After opening introductions and a review of the purpose of the focus group, Activity #1 will be handed out to participants to begin the discussion. This discussion is to take only about 15 minutes. The intent is to identify potential role conflicts, provide a “headset” for the following two questions, and begin the discussion before addressing more potentially difficult questions.

The following questions address your organization’s role as part of the statewide support system designed to build capacity in schools and districts identified for improvement under SASS or through VESID’s Key Performance Indicators.

Organization: _____

- (1) Check the roles that you/members of your organization perform in working with schools or districts identified as low performing.

- | | |
|--|-------|
| a) Coaching/mentoring | _____ |
| b) Planning | _____ |
| c) Classroom level/content area training | _____ |
| d) Other professional development with staff | _____ |
| e) Training for students | _____ |
| f) Brokering services | _____ |
| g) Monitoring | _____ |
| h) Training, other work with parents | _____ |
| i) Providing funding/grants | _____ |
| j) Other (list) _____ | _____ |
| k) Other(list) _____ | _____ |

- (2) Do you experience any conflicts between these roles? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

B. Strategies and approaches to school improvement and assumptions/rationale behind them (40 minutes)

- (1) What is your approach to working with schools and districts?
- (2) How do you go about working with schools/districts that have been identified as for improvement?

Facilitator prompts:

- a) *What does this look like in practice?*
- b) *To what degree does your approach vary according to the context?*
- c) *Do you have a well-defined approach that is used by all in your organization? If not, what are the different approaches that you use?*
- d) *If you work with schools/districts other than those that are identified as low-performing, is there any difference in how you approach those that are low-performing?*
- e) *Describe how NCLB has impacted your approach.*

C. Purpose, Rationale and Assumptions

- (1) What is your thinking and reasoning behind the approach(es) you have described?

Facilitator prompts:

- a) *Why do you use <reference approach or strategies described in Section B>?*
- b) *What has influenced the approach that you take?*
- c) *Do you have a range of approaches in your organization, or do you have a well-defined common philosophy?*

*If possible ask for a description of their approaches to **entry, assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluating outcomes.***

D. Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system) (40 minutes)

- (1) In your region, your network works in many of the same schools or districts as do other regional networks in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC).
 - b. With which of these networks do you work most? (Obtain list)
 - c. Describe how, or in what ways you work together?
 - d. What are the reasons that cause you to work most with these ones?

Facilitator prompts:

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

- 2) *Funding sources*
- 3) *Similar schools/districts*
- 4) *Compatibility of approach*
- 5) *Personal connections*
- 6) *Organizational connections*
- 7) *Organizational capacity*
- 8) *Other*

- e. With which networks/organizations do you work least?
- f. What are the reasons that you work less with these networks?

(2) An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement (OSI) and VESID.

- a) Provide an example of a time when OSI and VESID worked effectively with you to support schools and districts identified for improvement.

Facilitator prompts:

- 1) *What made this interaction effective?*
- 2) *Probe for reasons: (information, timely funding and resources, administrative support, relationships, a common approach or understanding of the situation)*

- c. Talk about a time when you and OSI/VESID did not work effectively together.

Facilitator prompts:

- 1) *What made this interaction effective?*
- 2) *Are there ways in which you experience conflict/ineffectiveness when delivering services to schools/districts?*

(3) Do you experience any conflicts between these groups or roles that you are expected to play within the support network? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

E. Evaluation of Impact (20 minutes)

- (1) If your network were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with other elements in the network?

F. Change Process (5 to 10 minutes)

Facilitator note: Activity #2 will be handed out to participants to complete at the end of the session.

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

The state is developing a regional network strategy of which you are a part, intended to build the capacity of identified districts and schools. Please take a minute to provide brief written responses to the following questions.

(1) Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.

(2) Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

Activity #1: Identification and Discussion of Roles and Responsibilities

We recognize that your work is multi-faceted and may involve a variety of roles and responsibilities. To stimulate and focus our discussion over the course of the next two hours, we would like you to identify what you perceive to be your organization's role as part of the statewide support system intended to build capacity in schools and districts identified for improvement under SASS or through VESID's Key Performance Indicators.

Please check (✓) the roles that you perform in working with schools or districts identified for improvement.

- a) Coaching/mentoring _____
- b) Planning _____
- c) Classroom level/content area training _____
- d) Other professional development with staff _____
- e) Training for students _____
- f) Brokering services _____
- g) Monitoring _____
- h) Training, other work with parents _____
- i) Providing funding/grants _____
- j) Other (list) _____
- k) Other (list) _____

Please note any comments about your roles and responsibilities:

--

Please hand this in at the end of the focus group.

Network: _____

Region: _____

Appendix A: Study Questions and Protocols

Activity #2: The Impact of NYSED's Professional Development Initiative

Participant Feedback on NYSED's Professional Development Initiative

The state is developing a regional network strategy of which you are a part, intended to build the capacity of identified districts and schools. Please take a minute to provide brief written responses to the following questions.

- 1) Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.

- 2) Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, SEQA)

Network: _____

Region: _____

Protocol for District Superintendents

A. Role & Responsibilities

- (1) You have dual responsibilities – you are Superintendent of a BOCES and also the field representative of the Commissioner of Education. Please describe your responsibilities in each role as they relate to working with schools and districts identified as in need of improvement.
- (2) In what ways do these responsibilities complement or conflict with each other?

B. Strategies and Approaches to School Improvement

The Office of School Improvement is seeking to create a coherent approach to improvement among schools and districts that have been identified as in need of improvement.

- (1) What do you see as the District Superintendent role in improving student achievement in schools or districts that have been identified as in need of improvement?
- (2) To what extent do you perceive that in your (RSSC) region there is a coherent approach to supporting improvement in schools and districts identified involving the state-funded networks and the BOCES?
 - a. Specifically, how does this play out in your BOCES?
 - b. Specifically, how does this play out in the state-funded networks?

C. Leadership Interactions

- (1) In what ways do you work with the state-funded networks?
 - a. Provide examples in which you provide leadership.
 - b. Provide examples when your leadership worked and when it did not work.
- (2) What do you propose as the ideal relationship between these networks and the BOCES system?
- (3) An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement and VESID.
 - a. In what ways do you see NYSED working particularly effectively with the networks to improve school and district performance on state measures?
 - b. In what ways do you see a need for improvement?
 - c. What would you recommend as the optimum NYSED role in your region?

D. Impact

- (1) Given the resources that are allocated to these networks, what do you realistically think can be their impact?
- (2) To what extent do you think the state-funded networks in your region have been actually been successful in supporting schools or districts identified as in need of improvement?
 - a. Provide some examples.

Appendix B: Data Collection Activities, Dates, and Participants

Data Collection Update September 30, 2004

Overview

During the late spring and summer of 2004, the LAB collected data from three groups that play a role in the state's system of support¹: (1) regional state-funded networks, (2) District Superintendents, and (3) Office of School Improvement staff and managers.

To increase the participation of regional network partners, we held three sets of regional focus groups: one covering the West and Mid-West regions, a second set covering the Mid-State and East, and the third set focusing on the Lower Hudson and Long Island regions. A total of four focus groups (one for each network) were conducted in each region resulting in a total of 12 network-level focus groups across the state. Among regional networks, separate focus groups were held with representatives from each Regional School Support Center (RSSC), from 23 of the state's 47 Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRCs), from the seven Student Support Services Network (SSS) Centers, and from seven of the state's eight Regional Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETACs). Representatives from two or more networks (e.g., from the Syracuse and Albany RSSCs) participated in each focus group.

To better understand the perspective of District Superintendents and the role they play, we interviewed the six District Superintendents from BOCES that house (or serve as the fiscal agents) for the RSSCs.

NYSED focus groups were conducted in Albany with representatives from the Office of School Improvement, including individuals from the Regional School Support Team, the Student Support Services Team, Planning and Professional Development, and Public School Choice. A complete list of data collection activities is listed below.

Network Focus Groups

Western Region (Buffalo/Rochester)			Eastern Region (Syracuse/Albany)			Lower Hudson and Long Island		
Network	Date	# Attend	Network	Date	# Attend	Network	Date	# Attend
RSSC	June 30	7	RSSC	May 26	9	RSSC	June 14	9
SETRC	June 16	5	SETRC	June 9	7	SETRC	June 15	5
SSSN	June 18	5	SSSN	May 26	7	SSSN	June 14	7
BETAC	June 17	6	BETAC	June 26	3	BETAC	June 7	3

¹ The LAB's study focuses exclusively on the networks and SEA staff responsible for "rest of state" and does not formally include New York City.

Appendix B: Data Collection Activities, Dates, and Participants

District Superintendent Interviews

James Baldwin	August 11, 2004
Greg Vogt	August 11, 2004
Jessica Cohen	August 17, 2004
Don Ogilvie	August 18, 2004
John Pennoyer	August 24, 2004
Gary Bixhorn	September 1, 2004

OSI Focus Groups

Pupil Support Services	August 3, 2004
Urban Liaisons and Regional Liaisons	August 9, 2004
Managers	August 11, 2004
Planning and Professional Development	August 12, 2004
Student Support Services	August 12, 2004

In addition to the data collection activities detailed above, the study will include documentation of OSI's professional development sessions and an analysis of SEA-level policy documents pertaining to the development of the Regional Network Strategy.

Appendix C: Regional Network Partner Summary Reports

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Regional School Support Centers Summary Report

The Summary Report is based on data collected through focus groups with RSSC Executive Directors and staff during Spring/Summer 2004 and incorporates formal feedback and revisions made by RSSC representatives in Fall 2004.

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Roles and Responsibilities

- Talk about the roles that you/members of your organization perform in working with schools or districts identified as low performing.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these roles? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Themes

Regional School Support Centers (RSSC) have multiple roles related to their work with schools and districts identified for improvement through New York State's education accountability system². The central role of the RSSC in New York State's system of support is to provide direct assistance to targeted schools and districts identified for improvement with the goal of improving school-level capacity to improve. Based on our discussions with RSSC directors and staff, RSSCs have one overarching mandate and four interrelated roles.

The overarching mandate is that of *building capacity* in the schools and districts with which the RSSCs work. No single definition of capacity building has been adopted by the RSSCs statewide, but it implies using approaches to all the roles in which the RSSCs engage that build content, planning, and leadership skills in their clients. Developing leadership and building capacity often requires that RSSC staff play the role of a change agent. They have to be willing to work intensely and deeply enough to utilize strategies intended to “change the culture” of the schools. They work by “facilitating learning and understanding instead of ‘telling’ schools what to do.” Coaching, mentoring, and modeling reflective practice are some of the strategies used to promote organizational capacity building. Successful culture and behavior change requires that RSSC staff members build trusting and credible relationships with teachers and school- and district-level administrators.

The four interrelated roles are described in detail below:

- (1) *School and District Planning*: RSSCs help schools and districts in planning for school improvement, primarily through analysis of assessment data and other school-level data. The role of the RSSC is to help the school staff develop an actionable plan based on a thorough analysis of the data, including the identification of appropriate interventions and strategies. When working with a school-based team on planning, RSSC staff members often play the role of a coach or facilitator as a method of building capacity. They seek to engage clients in ever-increasingly sophisticated analysis of data, and to work together with those clients so that those analyses are collectively owned.
- (2) *Job-embedded Professional Development*: There are two components to this role. The work of the RSSCs has evolved over time to focus more extensively on classroom-based training and support for teachers. Specifically, RSSC staff often provide targeted professional development to small groups of teachers (or in some cases to individual teachers) using

² For the purposes of this report, the state's accountability system as defined by NCLB and presented in the state education accountability workbook, defines the scope of schools and districts identified for improvement.

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strategies such as modeling instruction through mini-lessons, facilitating feedback sessions among teachers using new instructional strategies, mentoring and coaching, and providing training on classroom management. RSSC strategies are intended to improve the skills of teachers as well as increase teachers' ability and willingness to work together in mutually beneficial and supportive ways. Whereas RSSCs do not specifically engage in this work themselves, they have partnered with other organizations to deliver these services.

RSSC staff members also provide job-embedded professional development to leaders and leadership teams. This may take the form of coaching a leadership team, reflective conversations with building principals, coaching principals, and working with teacher leaders as they work directly in classrooms to improve instructional practice.

- (3) *Facilitator of Network Coordination and Support to Schools Identified for Improvement:* As part of the New York State's *Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement*², the RSSCs have been asked to take on the role of a coordinator and facilitator of services to schools and districts identified for improvement. The role as a facilitator of services to schools is emerging and it is not clear what this responsibility means or how it will be operationalized (both functionally and structurally) within regions across the state. RSSCs respect the different missions, strategies, and long-standing history of the different networks now being asked focus a portion of their resources and time on schools and districts identified for improvement. RSSCs seek to understand how the assets of each network can best support efforts to decrease the achievement gap in targeted schools. Additional information on the interactions between the RSSCs and other networks is provided in Part D, *Leadership Interactions*.
- (4) *Buffer and Translator of Federal and State Policy:* RSSCs act as a buffer between the State Education Department (SED) and identified districts and schools by translating federal and state policy and related messages in a way that limits the potential for confusion and contributes to local school improvement efforts. The need to act as a buffer between SED and the districts and schools is an artifact of two related issues: (a) the role of SED in relation to schools identified for improvement and (b) the impact of state policies and related fiscal policies on districts and schools.

In addition to the four themes described above, representatives from the RSSCs describe themselves having to take on multiple roles, depending on the situation and needs of the school or district. One additional role that RSSCs play is to broker services by helping schools identify appropriate professional development and resources as needed. With some exceptions, RSSCs do not see their role as a monitor of programs or state initiatives, nor do they provide training for students, parents, or community members.

Differences in Roles

Within the themes described above, there is some variance in the focus RSSCs place on different roles and related strategies. For instance, some RSSCs see their primary role as the facilitator of

² The Regional Network Strategy is New York's official system of support for schools and districts identified for improvement under NCLB and the state's educational accountability system.

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school and district planning, using a particular type of approach to data analysis, while other RSSCs focus more heavily on capacity building and facilitating dialogue among school staff. Some see their role more as a broker of services, while others have the capacity to provide content-specific training and professional development. RSSCs share common roles but they place different emphases on those roles depending on their expertise and assumptions about how to work most efficiently with identified districts and schools.

Role Conflict

Representatives of the RSSCs describe a level of tension in the relationship between SED and RSSCs stemming from potentially conflicting roles. While SED is often perceived as the monitoring arm of the school improvement process, there seems to be a number of SED staff who “want to be technical advisors and provide technical support” to schools and districts other than SURR schools for which they have statutory authority. These roles—SED as monitor or SED as technical support—are often conflicting and confusing and lead to the need for RSSCs to act as a buffer between SED and districts and schools. Further, the communication of SED policy directives and related funding issues often confuse (or seem to contradict) local district and school improvement initiatives.

Strategies and approaches to school improvement

- What is your approach to working with schools and districts?
- How do you go about working with schools/districts that have been identified for improvement?

Selection of schools in which to work, and the initial conversation with those schools is based on their identification through the state’s accountability system (e.g., NCLB identification, VESID Key Performance Indicators, and SASS). Once initial contact has been made and entry gained, RSSCs use a variety of strategies and approaches to school improvement, ranging from school- and district-level support for planning and data analysis to classroom-based professional development intended to improve teacher practice. The type of strategy or approach used by a particular RSSC depends on the context of the school and district in which they are working, the ability to gain entry and actually begin to work in those targeted schools, the identified needs of the schools and district, and the approach and specific skills that the RSSC brings to the task. RSSCs stress the need to have a flexible approach to working with schools and districts that is based on a contextualized and systems approach to school improvement. Outlined below are the primary support strategies used by RSSCs along with a discussion of some of the differences across the RSSC network. In general, the support strategies used by the RSSCs mirror their stated roles, in that they (a) provide support to schools with planning and the use of data to develop school improvement plans, including plans for professional development, and (b) utilize related but sometimes distinct support strategies that emphasize building relationships and trust with teachers and administrators as a necessary precondition to engaging in productive work and building capacity.

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Causal Analysis and Planning

The RSSCs use a central school improvement strategy that involves the analysis of data with teams of teachers and/or administrators. The process of engaging a school in a causal analysis that uses different types of school, student, and community data to inform planning is the primary means by which RSSC staff members assist with planning for school improvement. Through this support, RSSCs facilitate and lead teachers and administrators through an analysis of different types of data (including, but not limited to state assessments) that are intended to help a school focus its discussion and planning efforts. Focusing on data that accurately represent the current academic status of students (as well as other indicators of performance) helps to move districts and schools away from making decisions based on hunches and anecdotal evidence. It also helps the RSSC staff to help administrators and teachers focus on “issues that they can control and change” rather than attributing failure to parents and students.

Data analysis and support for planning is typically focused on school-wide issues, though it is often the case that the RSSC will gain entry into a school through a particular need (e.g., special education, math initiative, ELA or Mathematics scores) and then, as appropriate, broaden the discussion to focus on larger school-wide issues that are having an impact on student achievement.

Causal analysis and school planning are often conceived of as part of a linear and sequential process and equated with the creation of formal school plans. In some cases, this conception is accurate, but RSSCs cannot require this because they do not control the schools and districts with which they work. They also often begin work with an overwhelmed client after a formal plan has been written. In some contexts, RSSC staff members find it effective to help a school engage in job-embedded professional development and for staff to learn new strategies that can be integrated into a plan before RSSC staff create a plan that will assist them in closing the achievement gap. In all cases, RSSC staff members seek to engage school and district staff in continuous data analysis and planning processes that focus on changing individual and organizational behaviors. Some of these will result in written plans and some will result in modification of existing plans.

When working in districts and schools on planning and related issues, RSSCs use a variety of inquiry-based strategies to engage teachers and administrators in discussions around data. In the words of one RSSC representative: “We ask questions, facilitate dialogue and try to focus attention on teaching practice.” Oftentimes, these types of questions are used in conjunction with a planning process and the analysis of data; however, the use of inquiry-based approaches expands beyond the scope of planning and data analysis. For example, when initiating work with schools, one RSSC described how they often use state requirements (e.g., NCLB identification or CSPD school implementation plans) as an entry point, but then “...we offer to help them with their school improvement plan. We talk with them and begin a conversation about ‘You’ve been identified. Why is that?’” and then continue to ask probing and supportive questions that lead the teaching staff to become supportive of the planning process. Another RSSC described their primary strategy as one of “...finding a point of entry and an opportunity to build trust within the district.”

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Relationship and Trust Building

RSSCs highlight the importance of trust building as a prerequisite to successful engagement with a school or district, whether that involves support for planning or other technical assistance and professional development. When asked to name the characteristics of an RSSC staff person, the RSSCs describe a person who is highly skilled in working with people, is able to build trust and relationships with teachers and administrators, and is a continuous learner. On the other hand, individual characteristics such as having a prescriptive approach or a belief that they “know the correct way” to turn around schools are characteristics that would not support the work of the RSSCs. RSSCs take care not to use strategies or approaches that are “top-down” or require that they tell or instruct schools what needs to be done; instead, RSSCs utilize strategies designed to facilitate learning and understanding among teachers and administrators.

Additional Strategies and Network Coordination

RSSCs use a number of approaches to gaining entry and working with schools and districts not directly listed in the two broad themes discussed above. In some instances, the state math initiative has provided initial access to a school. A number of RSSC Executive Directors spend considerable time working with district administrators so that RSSCs and other networks can gain entry into targeted schools and provide aligned support to those schools once they gain entry. With respect to their emerging responsibility to coordinate services in identified schools, some of the RSSCs are offering to “host” and convene representatives from the other networks so that they can jointly strategize on how to provide coordinated services or, when appropriate, limit their services so as to not overwhelm a particular school.

Purpose, Rationale and Assumptions

- What is your thinking and reasoning behind the approach(es) you described?

The purpose and rationales that form the basis for RSSC strategies vary to the same degree that RSSCs’ use of strategies varies across the state. However, there are a number of cross-cutting rationales and assumptions that form the basis for how the RSSCs work with targeted schools and districts. Below is a selection of quotes that reflect the perspectives of the RSSCs, followed by a description of the central rationales and assumptions guiding the use of different strategies.

- *If we want to change what goes on in the classroom, then we need to go for change in teaching practice.*
- *Capacity building and dialogue lead to changes in teacher practice. We need to lay the foundation for meaningful discourse in schools.*
- *The culture provides for little to no professional dialogue—dialogue which is imperative in an educational setting—so we foster professional dialogue and trust among teachers.*
- *My approach is multifaceted; it is different because I look for places where I have good entry; my approach is contextually based.*
- *One size does not fit all. Our intensity of involvement should match their capability. We need to get schools to the point that when we leave they don’t know we are gone!*

School Based Interventions and Support – a Pragmatic Approach and Rationale

RSSCs work with schools in a complex fashion. When RSSCs describe the rationale and purpose on which they base the work with districts and schools, they describe it as an iterative process that involves working at multiple levels. According to RSSCs, it requires the continual revisiting

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or recasting of plans and activities based on shifting circumstances. As the following descriptions illustrate, RSSCs engage in different strategies at different times, guided more by pragmatic considerations than by predefined steps.

Job-embedded Professional Development. RSSCs stress that the focus and purpose of their efforts is to have an impact on the teaching and instructional practices of teachers in the classroom. They also seek to create organizational capacity so that schools will continue to function effectively when they lose RSSC and other network services. They have found that job-embedded professional development that may be simultaneously delivered at the district, school and teacher level are one of the most effective methods of achieving their goals. They cite research on professional development to support their rationale. There is an increasing understanding that in many instances, they, or some other organization, must directly work with teachers to change their practice. In order to facilitate change in teaching practice, some teachers need additional training on “foundational knowledge” related to teaching and learning. Some may need time to reflect upon how they are teaching and what they can do to improve their teaching practice. Implicit in this rationale for classroom-based training is the assumption that some teachers need additional content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and a process (including time) to reflect upon and understand why and how they can improve their instructional practice.

School Planning and Causal Analysis. A similar rationale is given as the basis for school-wide assistance with planning. If training and a process for reflection is needed at the classroom level, then there need to be structural and cultural elements within the school that support and encourage teachers and administrators to engage in reflective learning. Some schools and districts have not been strategic in their identification and implementation of particular interventions and strategies. As a result, less attention has been placed on issues and strategies that are more appropriate to the needs of schools that are now identified for improvement. To address this problem, districts and schools need to engage in a strategic and efficient analysis of data in order to identify the actual causes of low-performance and select appropriate strategies and interventions to address those needs.

Another rationale for planning, and in particular the use of causal analysis as a planning process, is the observation that the “...culture in many schools doesn’t promote professional dialogue.” To address this reality, RSSCs use strategies for planning (e.g., causal analysis) that not only help school teams analyze data and develop plans that address identified needs, but also serve as a process that “...helps teachers reflect on their practice and its impact, and to teach folks how to reflect on what they are doing.” Using such a strategy, it is argued, will build the capacity of teachers and administrators to become continuous learners and implement identified strategies after the support of the RSSCs or other networks have left.

Organizational Capacity and Leadership. In some regions where BOCES and other networks are able to deliver professional development in instruction to schools identified as in need of improvement, RSSCs focus heavily on building leadership and organizational capacity at the district and school level through coaching, mentoring and professional development. Strategies designed to develop organizational capacity are based on the belief that organizations (and in

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particular leaders within those organizations) may need to change their perspectives and assumptions about how they work with identified schools.

Relationships and Trust Building. Related to the rationales for classroom-based training and support for planning is the common belief that building relationships and trust is critical to the success of most interactions with schools and districts. For the RSSCs, “relationships and trust are needed to make human connections so that individuals become invested and committed.” Crafting strong relationships is critical at the district level in order to gain entry into schools and help coordinate services. Trust and credibility at the school-level are needed in order to support professional dialogue, reflection, and planning around data that will build local capacity for improvement. As was pointed out by one RSSC Executive Director: “You can’t begin to affect schools without working on district relationships and improving systems of communication.”

Flexibility and Complexity. RSSC directors continually seek to manage the dilemmas of creating high, common standards for all the work of their staff, communicating the expectation of common organizational strategies to those staff, adapting approaches as they and their staff learn more about how to work effectively in the schools identified under NCLB, and retaining flexibility because they have learned that their approaches must be contextually based and responsive to the expressed needs of their clients. They manage these dilemmas in the context of relatively new organizations with continually expanding staffs. The RSSCs have consequently developed protocols or principles underlying their work through which to articulate expectations across staff. These protocols attempt to integrate research on school and organizational change, and instructional effectiveness and create an underlying coherence to their approach with all clients. These documents are often reviewed and revised as new experience is integrated into them.

RSSCs use a flexible approach to working with schools and districts because the work is context-based and constantly changing. The RSSCs emphasis on a flexible and locally-based approach is based on an understanding of the education system, and in particular the targeted schools and districts, as part of a complex system for which there is no one “right” answer that can be applied uniformly to all schools or even a subset of schools. Instead, the complexity of the education system, and the problems facing targeted schools, requires in-depth understanding of local context and school-based solutions.

Network Coordination. RSSCs understand that there is a need for the different networks to coordinate their support to districts and schools identified for improvement. Coordination of networks “enhances coherence” and alignment of the different resources and services provided to schools. Coordination is seen both as a means to decrease the number of confusing and mixed messages that reach the schools, contributing to their loss of focus and direction, and as a way of eliminating duplication of limited resources. However, RSSCs are sensitive about their “charge” to coordinate network activity. Their role is not commonly understood by all of the other networks, and in most regions strategies for managing this so that work of the partner networks is appropriately respected and recognized are still being developed.

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Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system)

- In your region, your network works in many of the same schools or districts as other regional networks in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC).
- An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement (OSI) and VESID.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these groups or roles that you are expected to play within the support network? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

RSSC Interaction with Networks

The extent to which RSSCs work with other regional networks varies across the state. Overall, RSSCs partner most often with SETRC to coordinate their joint efforts and provide direct technical assistance to targeted schools. RSSCs also partner with State Improvement Grant (SIG) efforts in targeted districts and schools. Coordination between RSSCs and SETRC (including related SIG teams) is based on the fact that they share many of the same schools, that the RSSCs received IDEA funding that required interaction with SETRC for the first three years of their existence, and that the SETRC work is often built into the RSSC workplan. The alignment of SASS and VESID indicators also promotes coordination between the RSSC and SETRC. An equally important contributing factor to coordination is the existence of an individual relationship between RSSC and SETRC staff. RSSCs that employ staff with personal and working relationships with SETRC staff (or who have staff members who previously worked in SETRC) point to these connections as contributing to coordination.

In some regions and within some schools, there is systematic coordination between RSSCs and other networks (e.g., BETAC and SSSN); however, the coordination is not consistent across the state. RSSCs are aware that many of the networks are working in the same schools, but that the work is not aligned. According to one Executive Director, “there is still a great deal of separate activity that needs to be integrated and not all of the networks are involved.” When there is coordination with BETAC and/or SSSN representatives, it is typically due to a preexisting relationship between individuals from different networks rather than based primarily on the needs of a particular school. RSSCs report that a factor hindering coordination among networks is the lack of clearly defined and communicated responsibilities and expectations about coordination from SED and VESID.

The ways in which the RSSCs work with other networks is still evolving. In some regions the RSSCs meet on a quarterly basis with partner networks, including but not limited to SETRC, BETAC, and SSSN. In other regions, network meetings are less regular and typically organized around a particular initiative or district issue.

RSSC Interaction with SED

The nature of the relationship between RSSCs and SED differs by region, but is generally characterized by tension. The primary connection with SED is through the Regional School Services (RSS) in general and the RSS liaisons in particular. It is at this point that the conflict is

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most often experienced, and some RSSCs and their SED liaisons negotiate this tension more effectively than others. There are several practices that RSSC staff members perceive decrease RSSC effectiveness in the field.

RSSCs report that although they are sometimes given the role of being field representatives for state initiatives, they are seldom consulted in their design, even though they may have a dramatic effect on how the RSSCs operate. The state mathematics initiative is an example. Consultation would provide SED with additional field-based perspectives that might make such initiatives more effective, and would also allow the RSSCs to engage in early planning that facilitated introduction of initiatives into schools and districts. Another source of tension is late distribution of funds, or provision of funds that must be spent within a very limited time. This tends to result in negative feedback from districts and schools, and less than optimal use of those funds. Thirdly, in some instances RSSCs find that SED requirements and definition of how the work of RSSCs should be carried out limit their options and ability to utilize fully research and their emerging experience. For instance, some RSSCs have found that the SED definition and promotion of root cause analyses as a planning tool does not fit their approaches to working with schools. One outcome of this example has been a diminishment of open dialogue and learning about a topic vital to effective functioning of the RSSCs.

Some RSSCs also experience role conflicts with SED staff. In general, both they and their clients perceive that SED staff members have a strong monitoring role. RSSCs generally see their role as support and would like to see this differentiation maintained. Some liaisons work directly in schools that are also served by RSSCs, yet do so from a different approach than the RSSC, which adds to turbulence within those schools. Finally, some RSSC directors experience conflict with different roles the RSS liaisons play. In some cases the RSS liaison provides support to the RSSCs and at other times the liaison is a monitor.

Adding to conflicts and confusion about roles is the emergence of federal initiatives such as the highly structured Reading First. Reading First requires much more monitoring than RSSCs have typically engaged in. The scope of Reading First has impacted the capacity of RSSCs to provide coherent services to targeted schools in that they have had to hire many new staff who are not familiar with the RSSCs' mission. These issues are compounded by the fact that in most regions there is little overlap between Reading First and the RSSC schools targeted under NCLB.

Evaluation of Impact

- If your network were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with other elements in the network?

The RSSCs have similar visions of what it would take for their organization to be effective and what that success would look like. With respect to working with other networks and service providers, RSSC representatives believe that coordinating their efforts with other networks will provide the best means of supporting the overall improvement efforts of schools and districts identified for improvement.

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For the system to be more effective, RSSCs believe it is necessary for SED to provide information and policy directives in a more efficient and clear manner, for SED to provide up-to-date data on identified schools, and for SED to strive towards the timely dispersal of funds connected to initiatives for which RSSCs are held responsible. Additionally, RSSCs feel that in some cases, SED attempts to micro-manage RSSC activities, leading to decreased effectiveness. It was also noted that alignment of network regions would be facilitate coordination, and that active involvement of the BOCES District Superintendents is a useful way to align services to identified schools.

The RSSCs vision of what success would look like in districts and schools is perhaps best expressed as “capacity building,” though a common understanding of all of the elements of capacity building and how it is developed may not be fully shared among all of the RSSCs. RSSCs know that effectiveness is tied to increases in student achievement and progress toward making adequate yearly progress (AYP), but they describe success as something more than improvement on a state test. Below is a selection of responses from the RSSCs that represents how they measure effectiveness and success.

- When the RSSC walks away, the buildings own the changes.
- When there is a change in culture in certain schools and the district knows it.
- When teachers and principals are taking initiatives for themselves.
- When we are doing our jobs we are invisible. (We are successful) When we can wean ourselves out of the process and we aren't missed.
- Growth of trust and relationships are signs of success.
- Evidence of positive change exists when the RSSC has left no footprints; when the district or the school feels that they are responsible for all of the changes made in the school.
- When schools have internalize the change that we have helped them to make.

Change Process

- Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.
- Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

Nineteen of the 25 RSSC participants responded to the questions. In response to question one, about half of the participants (9 of 19) stated that capacity building and organizational coherence are the two concepts that have been most fully integrated into their work with schools and districts. One participant commented on their integration of organizational coherence:

We have as an RSSC begun to become a more coherent/cohesive organization revisiting our mission/vision, identifying strengths and weaknesses, determining how to work together in a more collaborative, respectful and trusting manner. We are in the process of developing a plan for organizational structure that includes common language embedded professional

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development, reflective practice and designated time to work together. By doing this as an organization we can model it to our constituents.

Besides organizational coherence and capacity building, RSSC participants also stated that they had integrated collaboration (5 of 19), learning communities (4 of 19), and leadership mapping (4 of 19). Three of the 19 respondents felt that no change had taken place because the strategies were already in use prior to training.

In response to question two, over half of the participants (11 of 19) felt the training has brought about more collaboration with other networks. On the same note, 4 of 19 respondents stated that the training has increased their understanding and knowledge of what other networks do. Further, the training has also changed the way RSSC respondents think about planning and who should be involved (5 of 19). Four of the 19 respondents felt that the training has had a negative impact and strained their relationship with the SED.

RSSC: Activity 1 Summary

As part of the focus groups, almost 100% of RSSC participants (24 out of 25) completed the Activity 1 worksheet. Activity 1 focused on the identification and discussion of roles and responsibilities. The worksheet contained a list of roles and responsibilities that respondents were to check off as well as space for them to add other roles they were performing if not listed. The worksheet also provided space for respondents to note any comments about their roles and responsibilities.

The list of roles and responsibilities presented on the worksheet can be found in the table below. They are listed by respondent indication rate.

RSSC Roles and Responsibilities, Summer 2004

Roles and Responsibilities	Indicated	%
Planning	24 out of 24	100.0%
Other professional development with staff	24 out of 24	100.0%
Coaching/mentoring	23 out of 24	95.8%
Brokering Services	21 out of 24	87.5%
Classroom level/content area training	20 out of 24	83.3%
Providing funding/grants	17 out of 24	70.8%
Monitoring	14 out of 24	58.3%
Training, other work with parents	13 out of 24	54.2%
Training for Students	7 out of 24	29.2%

Student Support Services Network Summary Report

The Summary Report is based on data collected through focus groups with SSSN Coordinators and staff during the Spring/Summer of 2004 and incorporates formal feedback and revisions made by SSSN representatives in Fall 2004.

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Introduction

The purpose of the Student Support Services Network (SSSN) is to build the capacity of schools and communities to provide learning environments that create a network of academic and personal supports for all students to enable them to become successful, contributing and compassionate adults. Formerly called Coordinated School Health Network, the SSSN has evolved from a program that historically focused on coordinated school health (e.g., health education, safety, nutrition, health promotion, health services, physical activity, family and community involvement) to a program that provides a broader set of services focused on academic oriented outcomes and helping schools to develop supportive learning environments. These services are largely based on federal funding (NCLB Title IV parts A and B) as well as through other funding sources targeting different areas and issues that impact a school's learning environment. The services provided by SSSN members include, but are not limited to, topics areas such as school climate and culture, family community involvement, counseling, psychological and social services, positive discipline, attendance, youth development, safe schools, parent involvement, school connectedness, social and emotional learning, out of school time programming and health education. Over time, local SSSN teams have developed different areas of expertise and specialty based on the particular needs in their region as well as their own local capacity and skills. However, SSS Coordinators and staff share a common belief that a safe, caring and healthy school environment provides support systems to help students learn.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Talk about the roles that you/members of your organization perform in working with schools or districts identified as low performing.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these roles? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Student Support Services staff carry out a variety of roles as shown in the table below. Twelve of the 18 focus group participants completed a checklist of roles and responsibilities. Most agree that their roles involve assessment, planning and professional development with school communities. Other participants indicated that their responsibilities also include coaching and mentoring, providing funding, and training at the classroom level.

Student Support Service Roles and Responsibilities, Summer 2004

Roles & Responsibilities	Indicated	%
Planning	11 out of 12	91.7%
Other professional development with staff	11 out of 12	91.7%
Coaching/mentoring	10 out of 12	83.3%
Providing funding/grants	10 out of 12	83.3%
Classroom level/content area training	9 out of 12	75.0%
Brokering services	8 out of 12	66.7%
Training, other work with parents	8 out of 12	66.7%
Training for students	7 out of 12	58.3%
Monitoring	6 out of 12	50.0%

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One-half of the participants indicated that their jobs involve monitoring, which has increased as their role has shifted over the 2004 year. Responses to the monitoring role are mixed. Some SSSN members find that the monitoring visits provide them with access to schools with which they have not previously worked and that could benefit from their services, and they are able to carry out their monitoring in a manner that fits with their approach to working with schools. Some SSSN representatives, however, struggle with accepting monitoring as a portion of their job. As one participant stated, “we help them write school safety plans and we are also the ones to tell them they are out of compliance.” For these staff, monitoring conflicts with their technical assistance role. The SSSN coordinators anticipate that monitoring will become less of an issue as their roles become better defined.

Most of the coordinators agreed that there is a lack of clarity and understanding about their roles, both at the state and local levels. As the purpose and funding sources have changed over the years, so have their roles. Consequently, there is no uniform perspective of what Student Support Services does or could do that would help with districts and schools identified for improvement. SSSN coordinators feel that in some instances the state makes incorrect assumptions about what SSSN centers are able or funded to provide, leading to confusion and misunderstanding. Contributing to this problem is the perception that other state-funded networks, as well as some districts, do not fully understand the SSSN role in working with schools identified for improvement. This perceived lack of understanding, coupled with the lack of an evolving and relatively unclear role definition for the SSSN in identified districts and schools concerns SSSN coordinators. SSSN coordinators have worked hard to establish relationships with a wide range of schools and districts, and are concerned that they may jeopardize those relationships and refuse services to schools that have come to depend upon them because the SSSN focus is being shifted to schools targeted under the state’s accountability system. SSSN coordinators indicate that schools are concerned about this and want to be sure that they will continue to receive the same services from the SSSN regardless of their status in the state’s accountability system.

Strategies and approaches to school improvement

- What is your approach to working with schools and districts?
- How do you go about working with schools/districts that have been identified as for improvement?

Much of what SSSN does depends on initiative funding (e.g., Safe and Drug Free School and 21st Century Community Learning Centers) and some of the programs are more prescriptive (e.g., PBIS) than others. Whatever the reasons for working with schools and districts, SSSN strives to build relationships with district administrators and the entire school community. Many SSSN staff members are skilled group facilitators and/or mediators and they use these communication skills to build relationships. The key to the SSSNs’ success in establishing relationships, said one respondent, is being a “good listener” and using/modeling a process of asking thoughtful and provocative questions—an inquiry-based approach.

The initial entry into a school or district takes many forms: through collaboration and planning with district administrators, as part of team at the local BOCES, referrals from SETRC, existing relationships with schools based on previous work, notification of trainings, etc. Once in the

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school, SSSN staff work with a team through a contact person. As a focus group participant said, “this is when we start the relationship building.” SSSN staff may also work with any segment of the entire school community, including working directly with students.

In most instances, SSSN staff members are invited into a school or district to address a specific issue. Yet SSSN coordinators believe that the expertise they bring to a team is the ability to see the “whole picture or solutions” and guide the team to think more broadly. After gaining entry into a school, the SSSN representative works with a team (typically a committee or subset of a larger school improvement team) to figure out the best way to address the issue and meet the needs and context of the school. SSSN facilitates this process by assisting the school with conducting needs assessments, analyzing data, and creating, implementing and assessing plans to improve need areas identified through the needs assessment. In other situations, SSSN representatives may be called in to provide a particular type of service or professional development linked to a specific school-identified need or a particular program. SSSN representatives also provide support and assistance to administrators and teachers through staff development. In working with schools, SSSN uses data as much as possible, either to help inform the direction to take or to assess their progress in making changes.

SSSN staff members also help districts develop systems and approaches on working with outside providers. In some cases, the superintendent will identify teachers that need to be involved. However, dilemmas may arise when administrators and staff see things differently. As one participant stated, “we offer teacher training based on what they want but then they can’t get the release time to attend.”

The aim of SSSN is to build the district or school’s capacity to coordinate, align and integrate existing resources and to create or access new resources and programs when needed. SSSN helps schools and school communities to understand programs or resources, and guide them in a direction “that is based on data and helps to get them where they want to go.” The actual strategies that SSSN uses with schools identified for improvement do not substantially differ from how they work with schools that aren’t targeted, although the needs of these schools tend to differ from those of others with which the SSSN works. As one participant stated, “I tend to be more vigilant with them, they need more assistance, and their needs are more comprehensive across the board.”

What has changed is how and why they go into schools and the extent to which their support strategies are aligned with, and complement, strategies used by the RSSCs and other network providers. In targeted schools, SSSN staff members often enter the school with the RSSCs spearheading the work. With the RSSC and SSSN coming into a school together, the team approach can be overwhelming to school administrators and teachers. With some exceptions, SSSN representatives feel that schools are confused as to why the SSSN is teamed with RSSCs. As a result, some schools ask SSSN representatives questions such as, “Why are you here, we thought you were health?” When working in identified schools, the SSSN staff members are sometimes perceived as ‘required’ and intrusive by the school because they are perceived as coming in as a result of the school having been identified for improvement. The challenge for SSSN is to be more intentional in making the time to attend to the targeted schools.

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Purpose, Rationale and Assumptions

- What is your thinking and reasoning behind the approach(es) you have described?

When asked about the assumptions behind using an inquiry-based approach, SSSN staff agreed that it is the most effective way to build the capacity of districts and schools. An inquiry-based approach is one that uses a questioning process to gain a broader perspective in understanding and addressing problems, “we [SSSN] ask questions that provoke their own questions, and then they begin to ask their own questions.” SSSN staff model an inquiry-based process that, in turn, builds trust among school staff members and between SSS and school staff. Several SSSN coordinators mentioned that they have extensive training and experience with cognitive coaching, trust building and relationship building as ways to effectively build the capacities of schools.

Another assumption underlying their approach is that “adults are continual learners.” That is, adults always have to learn, “we can never assume that someone is done learning.” One participant admitted that the challenge is to figure out what else teachers need to know; “to find best practices and something they don’t already know.”

A challenge for the SSSN is that schools and districts often ask for a one-shot workshop on a topic, such as bullying, violence, peer mediation, etc. SSSN staff members are often in the position of explaining that their approach requires extended work with schools. “It would be easy if we could go in and tell them what to do, but when it’s over we are gone and we haven’t built their capacity.”

Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system)

- In your region, your network works in many of the same schools or districts as do other regional networks in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC).
- An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement (OSI) and VESID.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these groups or roles that you are expected to play within the support network? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

During the spring and summer of 2004, SSSN representatives identified two major factors that influenced which networks they tended to work with most: geography and existing partnerships. SSSN representatives reported that in some regions other networks are too far away for easy interaction. In regions where the networks are located near each other or even in the same building, there was a greater tendency to work together around planning, data collection and sharing of contacts. That fact that the regional boundaries of networks differ further complicates working together. In the fall of 2004, however, SSSN coordinators reported that as the networks (including their own network) have made a greater effort to work together and have developed effective communication protocols to do so, physical distance is becoming less of a barrier to collaboration. Increased communication among networks and the nurturing of communication

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(e.g., through protocols and shared norms) has supported increased work and partnerships with other networks.

Several participants mentioned that the networks with which they work most depends on established relationships rather than being driven by school needs. Participants provided several examples where their work with networks such as RSSC, BETAC, Regional Adult Education Network built on existing relationships. In one region, the RSSC and SSSN coordinators have worked closely together. They go into a school together, with the lead depending on who has the primary relationship with the school. They know that between them they can determine a way to work together and still respect the purposes of each network.

Student Support Service Network representatives have partnered with other networks in a variety of ways. In some instances, SSS joins with networks such as the Teachers Centers for training or leveraging resources. In one region, the SSSN and RSSC jointly picked a pilot school where they were working and created a process for working together. In another region, SSSN was invited to join a team consisting of SEQA, RSSC, and led by SETRC that was already working in a school. However, the SSSN staff member noted that they were brought in *after* the root cause analysis was done. Therefore, they had little influence on how the analysis, which focused on the needs of all the students in the schools, was actually designed and conducted.

In another region, the SSSN coordinator had worked with the RSSC director. Both are part of a leadership group that includes members of several networks. When the networks in the region are called to work with a school, the SSSN coordinator sits around the table with representatives from BETAC, SETRC, and the RSSC as well as other networks to jointly assess the needs of that particular school. They then jointly decide how to best coordinate their services to provide flexible, appropriate and immediate assistance to that school in target areas (the triage approach).

SSSN participants perceive that their work is oftentimes limited because the other networks “don’t know what we do” and each network has a defining mission that limits how they can work together. SSSN representatives see themselves as having the flexibility to promote a supportive learning environment whereas they perceive that other networks are limited by their missions or funding sources: SETRC focuses on special education, BETAC on bilingual and students with limited English proficiency, and the RSSC network concentrates on academics. As one person said, “regardless of the overarching plan, each network has what they must do.”

In general, participants believe that some members of the State Education’s Office of School Improvement (OSI) do not understand the realities of supporting change in schools. Some of the participants voiced concern that OSI doesn’t demonstrate that they understand or know what SSSN representatives do in schools and districts. Compounding this issue is the fact that SSSN coordinators report spending considerable time writing reports, but don’t receive adequate feedback or suggestions based on the content in the reports. For many, the types of data asked for and the outcomes they are asked to address in state-required reports don’t capture what they are really doing in schools. As a result, discussions and planning (e.g., involvement in technical planning meetings) with state office representatives tend not to address meaningful issues related to what SSSN staff actually do in the field. State-level decisions sometimes appear to be made

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and based on misperceptions and on what SED staff ‘think is happening’. SSS representatives feel that the core of their work is not well represented at the state level, which likely means that state coordinators of the other networks similarly don’t fully understand what the SSSN does in the field and how it can best contribute to work in identified districts and schools.

Experiences with state liaisons are mixed. Some SSS participants have established good relationships and communication with their liaison: “There is very little that my liaison does that I don’t know about. Her communication is wonderful, making sure everyone knows everything.” Others stated that the liaisons can sometimes unintentionally “stir up the pot with a school.”

Participants pointed to inadequate communication protocols and practices between them and NYSED, characterized as “craziness at the state level.” Sometimes this manifests in SSSN offices receiving the same request for information from several people in SED. Some SSSN coordinators appear to be “in the loop” while others are not. Some focus group participants perceive that communication from SED has “deliberately been reduced.” Participants also mentioned the negative impact of not having a contract or RFP during a time of significant change in direction and relationships with other networks. Said one person, “I have to be a network that is entrenched. I need to be credible. I’m there but the lack of an RFP can hurt our place at the table.”

Evaluation of Impact

- If your network were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with other elements in the network?

Equity of resources. In order to be effective across networks, there needs to be more equitable distribution of available resources across networks. Because of NCLB resources are predominantly directed to funding work in the content areas such as reading and math. However, “if schools aren’t safe, reading and math scores are not going up.”

Clarity of purpose. There needs to be more clarity of purpose and better ways to concisely describe what Student Support Services does. With more clarity it would be easier to collect evidence of the work and the effects on learning.

Common foundation. Participants believe that a foundation to work together across networks has not been established. They consequently experience frustration. They want more efforts devoted to get everyone “on the same page.” As one person stated, “even the language is unfamiliar.” There is not a common understanding of what all the networks do and it is not clear what supports all the networks bring to a team. Another said, “if we don’t know what we [each] do, then how can we work best?”

Professional development. SSSN coordinators feel that they are being asked to do things that are beyond their familiar areas of expertise. “We are being asked to move from health related issues to general education and change processes.” The common professional development time

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in Albany is a good start for getting the networks familiar with one another. However, when everyone gets together it is “overwhelming” and not a quiet relationship building time.

Change Process

- Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.
- Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

Ten of the 18 SSSN focus group participants provided written responses to the two questions listed above. Of the ten who responded, four stated that they had yet to integrate the concepts into their shared (or collaborative) work. The remaining six respondents reported that they have integrated several of the concepts discussed at the professional development meetings. The two most frequently mentioned concepts were capacity building and learning communities, followed by organizational coherence.

In response to the second question, there was no dominant trend in the answers given by respondents. Three of the 10 respondents felt the training had brought about more collaboration with other networks, produced more thinking about planning and who should be involved, and increased communication skills. Twenty percent of respondents also stated that training has increased their knowledge of what other networks do.

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Special Education Training and Resource Centers Summary Report

The Summary Report is based on data collected through focus groups with SETRC Coordinators and staff during the Spring/Summer of 2004 and incorporates revisions made by SETRC representatives in Fall 2004.

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Introduction

SETRC is a performance based network of professional staff developers that assists local districts, schools and stakeholders to develop, implement, and evaluate staff development plans based on scientifically researched principles and designed to result in improved student performance. The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that each State must develop and implement a comprehensive system of personnel development (CSPD) that is designed to ensure an adequate supply of qualified special education, regular education, and related services personnel, and develop strategies that will be used to address the State's identified needs. The SETRC network is the primary NYSED program initiative for implementing the CSPD at the local level through the provision of in-service training, information dissemination and technical assistance to program providers, leadership personnel, and parents of students with disabilities.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Roles that the organizations represented by participants perform in working with schools or districts identified for improvement.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these roles? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Based on the focus group data, SETRC representatives see themselves primarily as colleagues and supporters of school and district staff. They are well trained in a problem solving strategy with which to help schools and districts conduct root cause analyses and planning exercises. All conduct professional development, some work more with general education than special education professionals.

SETRC Roles and Responsibilities, Summer 2004

Roles and Responsibilities	Indicated	%
Coaching/Mentoring	17 out of 17	100%
Planning	17 out of 17	100%
Classroom/Content area training	14 out of 17	82%
Other professional development	17 out of 17	100%
Student training	8 out of 17	47%
Brokering services	13 out of 17	76%
Monitoring	14 out of 17	82%
Parent training & other	16 out of 17	94%
Providing funding/Grants	13 out of 17	76%
Other	5 out of 17	29%

SETRC staff members find themselves perceived, but do not always see themselves, as monitors "because [they] work with State Education," and because they have to provide data on personnel and staff roles in the CSPD report. Although there is sometimes conflict between these roles, SETRC representatives do not see monitoring as significantly inhibiting their work.

A number of focus group participants reported other types of conflict. For instance, playing a supportive role in working with schools provides opportunities for influence, but lacks the power

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to mandate change. Some would like more “teeth” to enforce change. Some experience conflicting claims on their allegiance expressed, for example, in “who do I work for, the State, the district or the BOCES?” The politicized environment in and around the largest school districts contributes to the tension experienced by SETRC staff in this regard. Within VESID, some SETRC representatives experience conflict with SEQA staff relating to access to data, decisions about where quality assurance reviews are to take place, and criteria and standards against which to judge the CSPD. These appear to be regional in nature rather than system-wide.

Lack of VESID/EMSC coordination is a source of conflict in their work. One way in which this manifests itself is in role conflict with RSSCs. In the words of one respondent, “They (RSSCs) think they’re in charge, and it’s in conflict with SETRC when we work with a targeted district. We should take the lead position with respect to the networks involved.” As of spring 2004, there still existed considerable confusion regarding the roles and responsibilities of different networks related to the coordination of activities in identified schools. For instance, SETRC staff members received different messages about their role and the role of the RSSCs from SED officials, RSSC colleagues, and VESID leadership.

Strategies and approaches to school improvement

- What is your approach to working with schools and districts?
- How do you go about working with schools/districts that have been identified as for improvement?

VESID has an extensive network of SETRC staff across the state. The network includes staff located within large city districts, regional staff located in BOCES, and specialist staff members who play a statewide function. Regional staff members attend to the needs of districts and schools in their region. Statewide staff members provide specialist assistance primarily to targeted districts and schools, and also seek to link network services to schools and to each other. In most areas of the state the needs of schools and districts outstrip the resources that SETRC offices have at their disposal.

SETRC has a well-developed model for targeting and intervention. Districts and their schools are targeted through the system of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that address such issues as a disproportionate of numbers of students, or of students from a particular group, being identified for special education services within a district. SETRC staff members are trained in a common child-oriented problem-solving model that uses data to identify “root causes” for low student performance and other issues related to the KPIs within a district or school. The data are used to develop an action plan, a Comprehensive School Personnel Development Plan (CSPD) plan. SETRC staff members seek to move districts away from offering a range of professional development for which staff can sign up based on their interest, to providing targeted professional development based on needs identified in the planning process.

As training provided to them has evolved over time, the SETRC staff members have become more sophisticated in assisting districts and schools to analyze data and create plans. They increasingly embed themselves in the organizations with which they work, and seek to focus on

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what is needed, not what is immediately wanted, by the staff members of those organizations. Although the approach and intervention originate in special education, SETRC seeks to influence schools to address the needs of all students, not just those in special education, and to integrate the information of the many other plans (currently 53 in total) that are required by NYSED into the CSPD. One reason for this is that special education students are often in mainstream classes. Yet this approach is sometimes not utilized by districts in which they work. Some schools do not integrate general education and special education planning, and sometimes the CSPD becomes yet an additional plan.

When SETRC representatives work in schools they often act as consultants to them, and support the planning process by facilitating and coaching groups of teachers and school improvement teams. Based on identified needs, SETRC staff members also provide targeted training to teachers in group settings or in individual classes. Although some districts are not pleased that they have been identified for attention, the success of SETRC is largely dependent upon the investment that districts and schools make to the process through which SETRC staff leads them. To encourage and promote the needed district- and school-level investment, SETRC staff members seek to build relationships with key administrators and staff, which itself is a time-consuming process. SETRC has a philosophy of seeking to influence the school and district staffs with which it works but also letting them choose their own course of action so that they are invested in it. SETRC staff members use varying strategies for doing so, including structuring and organizing data to help district and school staff identify problem areas, and “lead[ing] them by the nose to get them through the process.” SETRC seeks to build internal capacity within their clients. To this end, creating structures and coaching them through the process so that they can repeat it on their own in subsequent years is an essential element in the SETRC approach.

Purpose, Rationale and Assumptions

- What is your thinking and reasoning behind the approach(es) you have described?

SETRC does not control districts or schools, consequently it must seek to influence change where it is needed. A key to SETRC’s approach is creating effective local teams that can use data and plan effectively, and whose members see themselves as instrumental in enabling students to learn rather than as victims of their environment. Making sure that the “right people” are on the team at the outset is an important consideration. SETRC seeks to support its clients by helping them take ownership of planning and plans they collaboratively write. SETRC representatives use a root cause analysis process to help schools make decisions based on a careful analysis of data. SETRC believes that data-based plans that address underlying issues and that are owned by leadership within the organization with which they are working create strong solutions to low student performance. The ideal is that, “If you do your job well, they shouldn’t notice you’ve done your job.” A conundrum for SETRC staff is that, “it’s tricky to measure in Albany your effectiveness if no one sees it.”

A second rationale behind the approach is that SETRC staff members need to build capacity within the schools and districts with which they work so that work continues after they leave the site, and so that school the staff continues to implement, review and revise plans as necessary

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over time. This requires committing to work with schools or districts over an extended period of time. As a result, SETRC staff members provide schools with more process training than they did in the past. They also spend more time working with students and teachers than in the past, believing that both these strategies will more effectively build long-term capacity.

A third rationale is that the educational needs of special education students are best addressed in the context of improving the overall academic performance of all students, and not isolating special education from general education. Schools that deal with special and general education in isolation “don’t make a whole lot of progress.” As a result, SETRC representatives often work with mainstream teachers and try to broaden the focus of their assistance and support for planning from special education to general education.

Finally, within the last five years SETRC has moved from attending to the wants of the staff with whom they work to asking what is needed to improve learning. This approach tends to create more focus on impact. SETRC staff believe that this conversation is best addressed by using data rather than opinion and seeking underlying “root causes” for problems that are within the control or direct influence of district and school staff members.

Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system)

- In your region, your network works in many of the same schools or districts as do other regional networks in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC).
- An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement (OSI) and VESID.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these groups or roles that you are expected to play within the support network? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

Collaboration between SETRC and other state-funded networks reported by focus group members ranged from “None” to “We work closely. We work (together) not to be redundant.” Where there is collaboration the networks are able to decide what is needed in a situation and identify the best person for the job. In the best of circumstances networks are breaking down silos and developing trust, and districts are being provided with a unified picture of services.

In one region SETRC representatives engage in upfront planning with partner networks and have a shared approach to working with schools that is based on a common vision of school improvement. The shared approach and vision promotes shared responsibility for the work in schools. In this region, the network responsible for leading coordination varies, in some cases the SETRC takes the lead, and in other cases the RSSC does so. Data on where, and in which schools, the different networks are working are available to all networks through web-based software that is assisting with communication within and across networks. In other regions, SETRC staff members report that the networks are still learning how to collaborate and often have trouble deciding on what to collaborate. Collaboration takes time, and as new partners are added the learning process starts over. In the short term this detracts from time spent serving schools. Finally, there are some locales in which SETRC staff judge there to be little desire on the part of others to collaborate. SETRC is not considered to be included in conversations unless

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the conversation is specifically about special education. Coordination is the responsibility of individuals and there is no system in place to promote collaboration.

The RSSCs were cited most often as the network with which SETRC works, with SEQA mentioned second most often. SETRC representatives also work with other networks, such as BETAC, SIG, Early Childhood Direction Centers, Transition and Coordination Sites, a Parent Network Center and the VESID Regional Associate, although the contact is not as frequent or regular as with the RSSC. Cooperation with BETAC tends to be limited because its focus is relatively narrow. There is little understanding of the role of the Student Support Services Network.

The physical location of networks is a significant factor inhibiting or promoting interaction and cooperation between networks, although one region reported overcoming this issue. In one instance the creation of six RSSC regions has limited access to the RSSC because it is now housed so far from the SETRC office. On the other hand, those networks located in the same building tend to work together more easily. Even when co-located there is an instance where the SETRC staff is still trying to figure out how to collaborate with BETAC and SSN. Another factor influencing cooperation is the personality fit between staff members of the different networks. The Big-Four partnership agreements have also been a mechanism whereby SETRC has learned what other networks do and how they can work together.

SETRC representatives feel that communication patterns and mechanisms need to be improved so that staff members in multiple networks can learn about each other and exchange information, but not be overwhelmed with information that they do not need. Finally, trust is a significant issue. One respondent explained, “When you have worked hard with a district and build trust, it can be hard to have a new person into the process as you have to protect your relationship with the district.”

In general there are not significant conflicts with other networks, although some SETRC work overlaps with that of the RSSC, and sometimes there are so many agencies involved in a school or district that it is difficult not to get in the way of each other. Schools begin to feel inundated with support, which can become especially problematic when two different networks are working on the same issue but with disparate philosophies about its resolution. Sometimes state-funded initiatives interfere with work. For instance, in buildings that received Reading First grants, all the work on developing a CSPD that SETRC has completed with that building has been thrown out. Reading First is perceived as incompatible with the SETRC approach to planning and professional development.

SETRC focus group participants report that VESID, through its SEQA staff, has generally been very supportive of them. On the other hand, they experience inadequate communication between VESID and OSI, which plays out in lack of role clarity in the field. Examples offered were addressing “405” issues and the role of the SIG team. SETRC participants reported that it tends to be difficult and confusing to communicate with state level staff because the reporting lines for different groups are different. This plays out in the field in problems of alignment of regions between one network and another. “Whose meeting does a person go to when she’s funded from

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one place, but her territory may be overlapping with another place?” One participant stated that over the years it has been very difficult to obtain clear answers when asking state education staff a question. For instance, it has been very difficult to understand budget and funding requirements because there have never been clear answers to questions.

The current SETRC Targeted District Network Report (TDNT) reporting system is time-consuming and its worth is questioned. Although the idea of finding out whether what SETRC staff members provide effects student achievement is a good one, staff members question the validity of the statistics and worth of the report contents. The report requires days to complete, grading can focus on the report writer’s semantics, and feedback is slow. SETRC staff members had argued for a peer review system which would, from the perspective of the field, help SETRC staff members to learn from each other.

Evaluation of Impact

- If your network were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with other elements in the network?

SETRC is a mature network with a well-developed philosophy behind its approach. The Targeted District Network Report system has been put in place to assess and enhance its impact, even though the worth of that system is questioned. Focus group participants did not provide a picture of how SETRC would ideally be interacting with other state-funded networks. One respondent expressed a need was for more common structures, including rationalization or regions, and common approaches to working with schools.

Change Process

- Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.
- Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

The professional development has promoted collaboration between networks. Few SETRC staff members have participated, so the content of the OSI professional development has not had a direct impact on SETRC work in the field. VESID professional development on process and staff communication skills has been positively received. SETRC staff members would like access to new professional development to keep abreast of new work in different subject areas.

Bilingual/ESL Education Technical Assistance Centers Summary Report

The Summary Report is based on data collected through focus groups with regional BETACs in Summer 2004 and incorporates revisions provided in Winter 2004-05.

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Introduction

Bilingual/ESL Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETACs) provide staff development and technical assistance to all educators, specifically on issues pertaining to Limited English Proficient (LEP) students³. BETACs are part of the state system of technical assistance and support specifically focused on closing the gap in students' performance in districts and schools with LEP students. There are 13 centers across New York. Eight of the 13 centers are located outside of New York City, with two located on Long Island, and the remaining six in upstate New York. The upstate and Long Island centers are located in BOCES around the state, yet they are responsible for serving students from regions larger than covered by the BOCES in which they are housed. The centers offer resources and training on issues pertaining to LEP students and receive funding through grants from the Office of Bilingual Education (OBE). These centers assist the New York State Education Department's Office of Bilingual Education (NYSED/OBE) to improve and strengthen the quality and delivery of services to school districts with LEP students.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Talk about the roles that you/members of your organization perform in working with schools or districts identified as low performing.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these roles? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

BETACs are required to work with all school districts that have LEP students in their population. BETACs 1) provide a range of services to ensure all districts are in compliance with regulations contained in the Commissioner's Regulations (CR) Part 154, and 2) assist schools/districts to assure their LEP students attain achievement levels stated in CR Part 154 and Title III of NCLB. The mission of the BETACs—to enhance the development of knowledge and competencies of educators, parents, and local communities needed to support academic excellence of LEP students—does not solely target schools and districts identified for improvement through New York State's education accountability system⁴. Therefore, within a county the number of low-performing schools/districts may be a subset of the schools/districts with which BETACs are expected to work. However, schools/districts in the "Big 4" cities (Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, and Yonkers), as well as all schools identified as in need of improvement (SINI) and SURR schools, have priority in receiving BETAC services.

During the focus groups, BETAC representatives discussed their roles working with all schools and how these roles and activities overlap with their work in identified schools. BETAC representatives pointed out that a critical issue is to ensure that staff provide services to districts according to LEP needs as well as to schools on the SINI list. The link between the mission of the BETAC network and the focus of the state's Regional Network Strategy is evolving and

³ <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/biling/betac.html>

⁴ For the purposes of this report, the state's accountability system as defined by NCLB and presented in the state education accountability workbook, defines the scope of schools and districts identified for improvement.

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sometimes leads to confusing situations and interactions between BETAC and other networks. If confusion exists, it may indicate that an optimal level of communication among the partners in the Regional Network Strategy has not been achieved yet. However, there is a common understanding that all of the network partners should be included in the process to determine the services needed to increase the achievement of all students.

Although BETAC representatives carry out a variety of roles, there are three interrelated roles that they describe as critical to their work. Specifically, BETACs provide *coaching and mentoring* to district and school staff on issues related to LEP students, they *assist schools and districts with planning*, and they *provide training and technical assistance* (e.g., seminars, workshops, answers to regulatory questions, advice on program design, referral to translators and interpreters, etc.) to central office administrators, principals, ESL and bilingual teachers, and classroom teachers in regard to issues such as cultural diversity, language acquisition, and other issues related to teaching students from diverse backgrounds with diverse language skills. Generally, BETACs respond to requests from schools and provide services based on the district's plan to serve LEP students, and its CR Part 154 and Title III applications. However, there are times when requests originate from a superintendent, another network, or SED.

BETAC representatives see themselves as providing support and assistance, rather than monitoring or checking for compliance. Compliance issues are handled on a case-by-case basis between the BETAC and OBE. Ideally, the monitoring function is the responsibility of NYSED. However, NYSED has neither the staff nor the budget to monitor all cases of non-compliance. A significant amount of BETAC staff time is committed to reviewing district applications/reports, as well as ensuring that those districts out of compliance take the appropriate steps to meet the regulations.

Strategies and approaches to school improvement

- What is your approach to working with schools and districts?
- How do you go about working with schools/districts that have been identified for improvement?

BETAC representatives use diverse approaches in providing technical assistance to school districts. BETAC staff members engage in work with districts and schools at the invitation and request of district administrators, CR Part 154 coordinators, school principals, and teachers. In order to gain entry into schools, BETACs publicize their services and build relationships with district staff, including the CR Part 154 coordinator. BETACs, as a network, have a common process that pertains to interventions with districts out of compliance with the provisions of CR Part 154 and Title III. BETAC support is context dependent and often related to specific needs previously identified by a particular district or school through reports submitted to NYSED/OBE. Reviews of these reports serve as a needs assessment for both school districts and individual school buildings; they provide an enhanced perspective of the school. BETAC staff also use existing documents (e.g., Quarterly Reports of technical assistance and BETAC Request for Proposals) and discussions with relevant staff, such as the CR Part 154 coordinator and teachers to further gauge the needs.

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One concern has been the lack of quality data specific to LEP student achievement. Consequently, it has been difficult to identify the impact of LEP students on NCLB accountability requirements. Some BETAC staff said it has been a challenge to determine the best way that services should be focused. In the absence of data related to student achievement, some BETACs described using focus groups and surveys to identify school needs. Other BETAC staff mentioned that they use general education data, school report card data, CR Part 154 data, and demographic/immigration data. Data pertaining to the performance of LEP students in acquiring English will soon be available through the state mandated use of the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test. This test is new, and several BETAC staff were instrumental in its development.

The services provided by BETAC vary across districts. Large urban districts tend to have issues with crime and poverty, whereas small rural districts may have expanding LEP populations and lack the resources to bring in skilled teachers or appropriate training. BETAC technical assistance and support are multifaceted and ongoing. They are provided through telephone, e-mail, fax, in-office consultations, and site visits. Several BETAC staff members mentioned that they sponsor and coordinate region-wide conferences, collaborate with institutes of higher education, and author statewide publications regarding education and LEP students.

Much of the content of the support provided by BETAC is focused on school-level needs related to ESL teachers and LEP students and can vary significantly across geographic regions and demographic populations. Some technical assistance programs are offered to multiple school districts when a common theme is evident among them. Other programs are targeted to specific district needs. The latter is more often the case for schools and district identified as low performing.

Participants of professional development technical assistance programs may include mainstream teachers, administrators, ESL teachers, special education teachers, guidance counselors, teacher assistants, and parents. For example, in some schools, BETACs may provide training for mainstream teachers on how to acclimate LEP students to a mainstream classroom. In other schools, they provide training for ESL teachers on how to align ESL standards with classroom instruction. BETAC also provides training on cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity. In addition to school-based technical assistance, some BETACs convene summer trainings and voluntary support groups for teachers to learn instructional strategies that they plan to use in their classrooms during the school year. The key, according to one BETAC representative, is to “establish context” in order to determine the scope of services to be provided to a school.

In general, the type and level of support provided to schools identified as in need of improvement are more intense than to non-identified schools. For example, two BETACs reported that they stress “coaching and mentoring” to a greater extent in SINI schools than in non-SINI schools. BETACs’ involvement with identified schools focuses on systemic change through reframing and restructuring programs for LEP students. This level of involvement frequently includes collaboration with other state technical assistance networks and SED

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liaisons. It is important to note that non-identified schools can also require significant commitment of BETAC time because of increasing enrollment of LEP students.

BETAC representatives identified barriers that can limit their ability to work in SINI schools. In most districts outside of New York City, the bilingual and ESL coordinator is the same person. However, in some districts in which there are two coordinators, there are communication problems between the bilingual and ESL coordinators. As a result, these districts often lack a coordinated approach to working with LEP students. This has an impact on the ability of BETAC representatives to engage effectively with the schools. The BETAC list serve actively works to bridge communication issues. Another challenge is that the district office may believe that it has the resources to attend to LEP students and sees no need to bring in an outsider to work with its schools. A SINI/SURR school might be overwhelmed with initiatives targeting other student populations or the general student population. As a result, it may not be willing to devote time to addressing LEP student needs because this population is relatively small. A number of BETAC representatives expressed concern that districts and schools often do not seem to recognize LEP students as an important population to serve, even within the context of NCLB reporting requirements.

Purpose, Rationale and Assumptions

- What is your thinking and reasoning behind the approach(es) you have described?

The purpose, rationale, and assumptions guiding the strategies and approaches used by BETAC staff are clearly linked with the overall mission of BETAC. The mission is “to enhance the development of knowledge and competencies of educators, parents, and local communities needed to support academic excellence of all LEP students.” Specifically, the stated goals⁵ are to:

- provide technical assistance on policies and regulations, availability of funding, educational resources, and implementation of higher learning standards;
- assist parent and community outreach programs and activities that support and enable limited English proficient students to be successful in school; and
- provide training opportunities that enhance the skills and competencies of all educators who have an impact on the learning of limited English proficient students.

BETAC aims to provide clients with tools to see that LEP students receive the best education, to “empower” clients. In the words of one BETAC representative: “Our office mission is to meet the needs of all kids, but for us specifically it is about LEP kids because for too long they’ve been ignored. We want to help teachers find creative ways of meeting those needs.” Another BETAC representative said, “Our goal is to get the students the services they need and (for) students to receive the best possible education given their circumstances.”

BETAC representatives are passionate about their work around LEP students who have been traditionally underserved. In conjunction with the research, BETAC staff know that LEP students

⁵ Official purposes as listed on the BETAC website: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/biling/betac.html>. BETAC’s Program Purpose and Description are contained in the BETAC RFP.

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(and all students) are diverse and would be best served by improved instructional strategies (e.g., differentiated instruction). BETAC representatives describe themselves as “advocates for the students.” With the needs of the students at the forefront, BETAC representatives educate and inform all teachers, school administrators, and parents about the needs of LEP students. BETAC strategies and approaches are based on the assumption that many teachers do not understand why they need to change their practice or how to change it, and that teachers do not understand the needs of diverse students and LEP students, in particular. Teachers need to understand “what it feels like when there are high expectations but you don’t have the language tools to meet those standards,” according to one BETAC representative. BETACs work goes beyond sensitizing educators. BETAC staff play critical roles in designing entire programs for LEP students, in working with parents of LEP students, and in creating resource documents for implementing state learning standards.

In order to effect change in teacher practice, BETACs use strategies intended to promote reflection and meta-cognition among teachers to help them understand how and why they should change teaching practice. BETAC support strategies are intended to “try to change the mindset of mainstream teachers. To do this we try to change the system and culture of schools (and)...the impact should be changes in teaching practice.” The shift in culture and belief among teachers of LEP and diverse students that will come from such understanding of different perspectives and backgrounds is a prerequisite to changes in teaching instruction.

Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system)

- In your region, your network works in many of the same schools or districts as other regional networks in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC).
- An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement (OSI) and VESID.
- Do you experience any conflicts between these groups or roles that you are expected to play within the support network? If so, what is the impact of those conflicts? How do you manage them?

The extent to which BETAC interacts and coordinates activities with other networks varies by region. In some regions, BETAC is an active partner with other regional networks, whereas in other regions, there is little coordination of activities except when based on pre-existing relationships among network representatives. For example, several BETACs are crucial partners in their regional network planning. They meet and plan regularly with network partners. When coordination does occur, it typically involves BETAC, SETRC, and Bilingual SETRC, or BETAC and the RSSC. Some BETACs also coordinate with the SSSN.

Coordination and interaction between BETAC and other networks typically occurs during joint planning meetings or while planning for a particular school- or district-based intervention/workshop. BETACs coordinate activities with Bilingual SETRC because LEP students are often (mis)identified as special education students and therefore are over-represented in the special education population. As a result, some BETACs co-sponsor events

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and workshops with Bilingual SETRC. In two regions, BETACs noted that RSSC-sponsored regional network meetings had resulted in increased coordination.

There are two factors that support increased coordination and collaboration among BETAC and partner networks:

- (1) *Location*: When the BETAC is located in the same building as other networks, typically within a specific BOCES office complex, then the likelihood for collaboration and coordination rises. In certain regions, BETAC representatives report that they work with SETRC, SSSN, and RSSC staff “because we are all housed in the same building. When you see people a lot, you talk. We’re at the stage of informal collaboration.” Representatives from this same region felt that “it’s a huge advantage to be in the same building. We have an attitude where we’re not afraid to reach out and ask for information. And in many organizations people don’t want to share.”
- (2) *RSSC-initiated meetings*: As noted above, some BETACs have participated in regional network meetings that have resulted in discussions with network counterparts (with SSSN and SETRC) and increased coordination of activities in schools identified for improvement through NCLB. While BETAC representatives engaged in regional meetings feel that coordination is positive, they report that it can also result in a drain of finite resources. Because RSSCs focus solely on SINI schools, there is pressure to focus resources on those schools. However, BETACs have responsibility for other schools not always identified for improvement in the current system. Their concern is that smaller regions with LEP students that are not on the identified (SINI) list and have limited resources will not receive the services they need and will end up being identified for improvement under NCLB.

In summary, BETACs carry out all their mandated responsibilities while working in collaboration with the various state accountability networks.

BETAC representatives interact with the Office of Bilingual Education (OBE), directed by Carmen Perez Hogan. BETAC representatives are aware that there is not yet consensus at the state level between OBE and OSI related to the focus of school improvement activities and the role of BETACs in the state’s overall regional network strategy.

A number of BETAC representatives stated that they feel that the direction OSI is taking towards school improvement (e.g., stressing a systems approach to school improvement and promoting coordination) is appropriate. However, they recognize that a systems approach may not align with the mission and direction promoted by OBE. The state system by which schools and districts are identified may not be relevant to the LEP population. Therefore, some identified schools/districts may not have issues related to LEP students. That is, the BETACs’ client pool is more extensive than that of the Regional Network Strategy. Some wonder if the network approach would be best applied to those specific situations in districts identified for services by both the BETAC and the Regional Network. Other BETAC representatives are wary of being subsumed by the OSI focus and approach and what that could mean for the many LEP students in schools not on the identified list. With this important consideration in mind, most BETAC representatives are eager to engage in work with partner networks and participate in the quarterly

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OSI professional development sessions to meet needs of most at-risk students, many of whom are limited English proficient. A few BETAC representatives also expressed concern that they have been notified of the OSI professional development sessions after the fact or have received contradictory messages about their attendance at these meetings.

Evaluation of Impact

- If your network were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with other elements in the network?

BETAC representatives stated that they need increased staffing in order to better meet the needs of all the schools requiring assistance, especially given the new emphasis on working with schools identified for improvement. With new staff, they would be able to develop content area specialists who would be better able to partner with RSSC and SETRC staff in targeted schools. One suggestion given is to add one BETAC staff per BETAC location. This person could function as an official liaison of the regional network teams.

In terms of evaluation, BETACs received both formal and informal feedback on their effectiveness. Formally, BETACs are required to complete a final evaluation of their activities within 30 days of the end of each funding period. Also, after each BETAC professional development activity, respondents complete an evaluation. Informally, BETACs know that they have been effective when they get positive feedback from districts and schools and when they receive questions from clients that reflect a greater understanding of the needs of LEP students.

Change Process

- Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.
- Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

In response to question 1, all but one respondent specifically stated that organizational coherence had been integrated and gave an example. Three of the five BETAC respondents also felt that capacity building and learning communities have been integrated due to the training and through network meetings. One respondent summed up all three concepts with the following comment:

Learning communities have proven essential in reviewing data, planning and providing technical assistance to SINs. It supports capacity building in a comprehensive way without repetition. It provides organizational coherence to SINs. For example, when we meet about a common school, we share information, and include all stakeholders; everyone is an essential part of the process, working toward mutual goals.

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In response to question 2, four out of five respondents felt the training had brought about more collaboration with other networks. Two respondents stated that the training had increased their understanding and knowledge of what other networks do. One respondent said that the training had also changed the way they think about planning and who should be involved in the planning process.

Activity 1 Summary

As part of the BETAC focus groups, eight of the twelve participants (67%) completed a worksheet⁶ that asked participants to identify and discuss their roles and responsibilities. Respondents were asked to check off a list of all the roles they perform as part of their organization in working with schools/districts identified for improvement and to add other roles they perform, if not listed. The worksheet also provided space for respondents to note any comments about their roles and responsibilities.

The list of roles and responsibilities presented on the worksheet is provided in the table below. They are listed by respondent indication rate.

BETAC Roles and Responsibilities, Summer 2004

Roles and Responsibilities	Indicated	%
Planning	8 out of 8	100.0%
Other professional development with staff	8 out of 8	100.0%
Coaching/mentoring	7 out of 8	87.5%
Classroom level/content area training	7 out of 8	87.5%
Brokering services	7 out of 8	87.5%
Training, other work with parents	7 out of 8	87.5%
Monitoring	6 out of 8	75.0%
Providing funding/grants (mini-grants for specific activities, such as parent trainings or reading/evaluating grant proposals that come into SED-OBE)	6 out of 8	75.0%
Training for students	4 out of 8	50.0%

Additional roles and responsibilities listed by the focus group participants included:

- Grant writing and review assistance
- ESL teacher assistance
- Facilitation and coordination of conferences and meetings
- Networking between SED and the networks

⁶ The worksheet is a standard form created for this study to gather information from the four major networks in the Regional Network Strategy.

District Superintendents Summary Report

The Summary Report is based on data collected through interviews with six District Superintendents in August and September 2004 and incorporates revisions made by District Superintendent representatives in Fall 2004.

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Introduction

There are 37 District Superintendents in New York State. For the purposes of this study, the six District Superintendents who successfully bid to host Regional School Support Centers in 2000 were interviewed to add their perspectives to the LAB study of the NYSED Regional Network Strategy. The questions asked of them paralleled those asked of members of state networks and the Office of School Improvement.

Role and Responsibilities

- You have dual responsibilities—you are Superintendent of a BOCES and also the field representative of the Commissioner of Education. Please describe your responsibilities in each role as they relate to working with schools and districts identified as in need of improvement.
- In what ways do these responsibilities complement or conflict with each other?

District Superintendents serve as both CEOs of their BOCES and field representatives for the Commissioner of Education. In the former role, they run an organization that depends on the purchase of services from districts. In the latter, they have a clear directive from the Commissioner to focus on improving student achievement on state assessments. This role requires them to move beyond supporting needs expressed by their constituent districts to influencing them to change practice in a more explicit fashion than has often been the case in the past. Two District Superintendents responded that these can be integrated, but “there sometimes has to be a very careful dance between the two roles.” The BOCES does have resources that can be used to support many schools in their improvement efforts, and in some cases RSSC resources can be leveraged to complement these services. The state-funded networks, however, are the only formal source of resources that enables them to fulfill their charge from the Commissioner.

Several District Superintendents stated that their role as field representative to the Commissioner has evolved. They have been given additional responsibility to ensure progress towards all students meeting state standards but no formal authority or structure through which to exercise this responsibility, and few formal resources other than the state-funded networks. Although District Superintendents may be expected to serve as monitors, they have no authority to enter districts in this role. They can only use the “bully pulpit” and are entirely dependent on NYSED for negotiating or imposing change on a district if that is considered necessary. Their effectiveness is consequently based primarily on relationships, which work when there is “talented, hard-working collaborative leadership in place.” One District Superintendent cited the potential conflict between supporting deep change in schools and districts, and serving as a monitor, which is a role that, in his view, does not effect deep and lasting change.

A significant difficulty in the District Superintendent role emerges from the exclusion of the Big-Four and all other large city school districts from membership in BOCES under Education Law section 1950. In these districts, where the majority of schools identified as low performing are situated, the impact of the District Superintendent rests entirely on informal relationships. Most

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of the Big-Four have a tradition of independence that limits access by the District Superintendents and BOCES.

Strategies and Approaches to School Improvement

The Office of School Improvement is seeking to create a coherent approach to improvement among schools and districts that have been identified as in need of improvement.

- What do you see as the District Superintendent role in improving student achievement in schools or districts that have been identified as in need of improvement?

The District Superintendents offered a range of responses that fell into four categories:

1. *Increased Focus and Changing Expectations:* Some of the District Superintendents discussed how they are working to create a mindset in targeted schools and districts, as well as in local boards of education, that performance matters and that it is possible to make changes that will lead to improvement in student achievement. In certain situations, the districts superintendents feel that it is necessary to motivate administrators and district officials and convince them that change is needed. However, the District Superintendents did recognize that in some cases, “people need to be engaged and pulled and tugged into change. That takes time and skill to do that.” In some cases, the District Superintendent does need to play the role of the “heavy.”
2. *Coach and Facilitator:* Several District Superintendents stated that they serve as a coach to local superintendents as a means of facilitating and promoting change and improved student achievement in districts and schools identified for improvement.
3. *Identifying and Targeting Appropriate Interventions:* District Superintendents stated that one of their key roles is to organize the services that they can provide and identify particular services that would best meet the needs of identified schools. One District Superintendent stated that their role was to “...insure that we are providing services in a coherent fashion, and the right services as opposed to just throwing things at them (schools).” In order to full this role, District Superintendents stated that they needed to be knowledgeable about low-performing schools and understand that in some cases, identified schools may need differentiated services.
4. *Strategic use of the RSSCs:* The emergence of the RSSC as a central element of the state’s system of support for identified schools has provided new ways for District Superintendents to meet the Commissioner’s directive to close the achievement gap. One District Superintendent stated the RSSCs provide a mechanism to focus the work of other service providers (e.g., teacher centers, Institutes of Higher Education, and other stake holders) by providing a forum for these organizations to “come together to think about how they are going to deploy resources” in identified schools. Another District Superintendent feels that the work of the RSSCs directly supports his role because of the formal link between the RSSC and the NYSED Office of School Improvement,

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- To what extent do you perceive that in your (RSSC) region there is a coherent approach to supporting improvement in schools and districts identified involving the state-funded networks and the BOCES?

District Superintendents are working to create a coherent approach to supporting schools and districts within the networks for which they have direct responsibility. There is a high degree of interaction among those networks, which is leading to significant improvements in the coherence of services the networks provide. District Superintendents have created several different organizational structures for achieving this objective. In the Central and Western regions, for example, the District Superintendents have put all the networks they are responsible for under the supervision of a single Associate Superintendent. Elsewhere, an Associate Superintendent is responsible for several state-funded networks and several related BOCES services. In one region, the RSSC Executive Director answers to the RSSC Executive Committee rather than the BOCES District Superintendent. The Executive Director also coordinates RSSC work directly with each of the District Superintendents in the region.

District Superintendents have also used strategies such as co-location of services and district reviews with all providers to mitigate forces that drive networks and BOCES services to work in isolation or in competition with one another. They report experimentation with integrating and differentiating network and BOCES services so that while funds from networks and BOCES are not commingled, districts are provided with a wider range of services than what the networks alone could provide. District Superintendents express the need to provide services to schools whose performance puts them just beyond being identified under the SASS but are likely to become schools in need of improvement if they do not soon receive a significant intervention.

District Superintendents report less awareness of the activities of state-funded networks not under their direct control. They also report less coherence in the services of networks that are situated in BOCES in the region other than their own. Several suggested that this is the result of multiple factors, including a long history of networks functioning independently of each other and competition between BOCES. Finally, state-funded networks tend to identify more directly with the different offices in NYSED they are funded through than with the local BOCES in which they are housed. District Superintendents report that NYSED requirements and structures often limit networks' ability to identify with the regions in which they function, therefore diminishing the coherence of regional services.

District Superintendents report that the RSSC Executive Committees are not effective and attendance at meetings is often poor. One reported reason for this is that members of the committees feel they little power to influence services in their regions as these are tightly controlled by NYSED and so are not effective uses of superintendents' time.

Locating all the networks in a region within a single BOCES appears to lead to increased coherence of services. Yet, this strategy could also lead to an imbalance and creation of a two-tier BOCES system. If there is an evolution in this direction, a structure that recognizes this might be appropriate. One respondent suggested creating the role of Regional Associate

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Commissioner. This individual would have the authority to negotiate and make judgments on behalf of NYSED throughout the region and be responsible for all regionally funded networks.

Leadership Interactions

- In what ways do you work with the state-funded networks?

District Superintendents have been more or less active in creating structures in which the state-funded networks operate in their BOCES and regions. The details of specific approaches vary across sites, but the most active have used strategies such as integrating several networks within a single BOCES division. They have also sought to create coherence between BOCES and state-funded network services to schools and districts. They continue to address ways in which to provide services to schools “under the radar screen” of NYSED yet likely to be identified if not provided with significant services. The District Superintendents are also working to eliminate overlap between the services offered by the BOCES and by the networks. Two District Superintendents are seeking changes in legislation that would enable them to extend at least some services to the big city schools in their region.

District Superintendents are not closely involved in the daily operations of the networks under their purview. Some, however, provide leadership by intervening with NYSED when they consider it necessary. Some District Superintendents also reported that they intervene with superintendents of the districts in their BOCES in support of the RSSC for which they are responsible.

- What do you propose as the ideal relationship between these networks and the BOCES system?

These District Superintendents tend to see the state-funded networks, and the RSSC in particular, as the only significant source of services to improve the performance of schools identified as low performing. As a result, they see the state-funded networks as most effectively lodged in the BOCES system. The District Superintendents have used a number of different strategies to integrate the services of the networks under their jurisdiction into their BOCES, and most have created organizational structures for this purpose. They have done this despite some initial resistance from NYSED, and report that these strategies have resulted in more coherent service delivery. One BOCES is experimenting with a comprehensive district review process that includes all service BOCES service departments, including the networks, in order to plan and allocate services to schools. Another BOCES is considering such a strategy.

The District Superintendents would like more latitude in how they utilize the services of state-funded networks in their regions. They consider that they and their staff have more knowledge of local context and needs, and would function best if given a charge, be held accountable to it, and expected to develop and implement strategies to attain that objective in the manner most effective in their region.

Several District Superintendents raised the issue of how to best deploy networks within the multiple BOCES in their region. Organizationally, it appears most effective to put them in a

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single BOCES. However, without a cross-BOCES structure this may work to the disadvantage of some BOCES in the region. One District Superintendent suggested exploring the creation of an organizational framework of regional superintendents.

Most District Superintendents stressed the importance of relationships in carrying out the agenda of improving the performance of schools identified as in need of improvement. Trusting relationships are important for the work itself, and also necessary because the organizational structures and policies that delineate the work are unclear. In this context, open bidding for centers is likely to be destabilizing and to diminish their effectiveness, according to one District Superintendent.

- An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the Office of School Improvement and VESID. In what ways do you see NYSED working particularly effectively with the networks to improve school and district performance on state measures? What would you recommend as the optimum NYSED role in your region?

District Superintendents responded that the Commissioner's ability to focus on academic outcomes, the development of standards, and demands for rigor in their application had been particularly effective. They also saw NYSED as an effective source of information. The District Commissioners responded that they appreciate the Assistant Commissioner for the Office of School Improvement because he utilizes his knowledge about how schools work and utilizes that information to inform his work. They also appreciated his capacity to listen to their perspectives. There was a response that VESID appears to be making a real effort to play a more facilitative role in achieving its policy directives than in the past, despite the strictures of the regulative framework in which it operates.

District Superintendents reported that although they have excellent relationships with some NYSED staff, some have no experience as administrators in schools and districts. In their view, the department tends to over-regulate. The result is diminished effectiveness and lost time. "It is a system," responded one District Superintendent, "designed to maximize control at the State level, which it does. But it minimizes effectiveness in terms of delivery of services." One District Superintendent offered the current middle-level initiative as an example of over-regulation not directly connected to the networks. This was differentiated from the policy decisions about the requirements for a Regent's diploma. How high schools help students pass the necessary five exams is the responsibility of those schools.

The information flow between them and NYSED is generally one-way, say the District Superintendents. One suggested that the NYSED approach in the field tended to be to "dictate and expect compliance," which made his job tougher. Another suggested that NYSED access the literature on transformational leadership in schools to inform its approach to the field. An outcome of the current approach is that the BOCES are, in the words of one District Superintendent, "an enormous resource not being deployed."

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District Superintendents recommended diminished direct NYSED activity in their region and a focus on the roles “that only it [NYSED] can play.” Roles they listed include resource allocation, creating and reaffirming standards, creating assessments, collecting data, disseminating information, sharing effective practices, exploring how to best enable BOCES and districts to “get the job done,” and making policy decisions about future direction. One suggested that the primary focus of NYSED in the regions should be in developing the infrastructure, or the “roads and viaducts” that would promote more effective use of regional resources. This, suggested another, should include communicating to the 700 school superintendents that they are expected to work with the District Superintendents as they carry out their mandate from the Commissioner.

One respondent distinguished between providing relatively detailed policy direction and just providing the funds now directed to the state-funded networks to BOCES. He did not support the latter. Several communicated that they expected to be held accountable. “I think the ideal relationship would be that SED would say you have X number of schools in your district, in your BOCES area that are targeted. We are going to hold you accountable for improvement. You figure out how to do it,” suggested one.

Several District Superintendents were unclear about the requirements and policy relating to state-funded networks, particularly if those networks were not situated in their BOCES. One District Superintendent suggested that regular, unfiltered, direct and high-level meetings at the Assistant Commissioner level with the District Superintendents, either with individual JMTs or as part of the monthly Albany meetings of District Superintendents, would permit District Superintendents to become more informed of SED policy and requirements. It would also allow the Assistant Commissioner to obtain direct feedback on how the centers are being received in the field and ideas on how to make existing structures more effective. This would be one step towards working with the District Superintendents and using their knowledge to develop the services that are required by schools in need of improvement.

Impact

- Given the resources that are allocated to these networks, what do you realistically think can be their impact?
- To what extent do you think the state-funded networks in your region have been actually been successful in supporting schools or districts identified as in need of improvement?

Several District Superintendents distinguished between the level of resources and restrictions that make them less than optimally effective. One respondent cited restrictions on the use of funds in general. Two mentioned that at different times significant funds had been given to RSSCs but they had been given deadlines for their expenditure that made their effective use impossible. One District Superintendent pointed out that the entire RSSC budget was a little over 1% of the budget of one of the districts in his BOCES that had very significant problems. The RSSC can only “do some modeling and set a tone. Show the district that things can be improved,” he suggested.

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Two of the District Superintendents did not immediately have specific examples of successful support of schools. The other four did, describing work in specific schools or several schools in a district. One identified a program he thought was particularly successful that was not well received by NYSED. The issue this raises is disparate philosophies of how change is best effected in schools. One District Superintendent said that he had not yet seen interventions that transformed instruction in the schools, and that this would in the long term be essential to necessary changes.

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Office of School Improvement Summary Report

The Summary Report is based on data collected through focus groups with OSI units in August and September 2004 and incorporates revisions provided in February 2005.

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Introduction

In Spring 2003, the Office of Elementary, Middle, Secondary and Continuing Education (EMSC) reviewed its organizational structure related to its capacity to implement the NCLB Act of 2001 and subsequently created an Office of School Improvement and Community Services (OSI) responsible for designing and implementing the state's system of support for low-performing schools. One of OSI's central responsibilities is to implement the Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement. In September 2004, NYSED entered its second full year of implementing the Regional Network Strategy.

As part of the study of New York State's implementation of the Regional Network Strategy, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) conducted focus groups and targeted interviews with the primary networks and organizations involved in the state's system of support to low-performing schools. In addition to meeting with four regional networks and the district superintendent representatives, we conducted a set of five focus group meetings and interviews with OSI managers and staff. The information provided here is drawn primarily from the OSI focus groups and subsequent follow-up activities. To the extent possible, we asked OSI staff members to focus their comments and discussion on their direct involvement with the Regional Network Strategy and their work in relation to low-performing schools. One group consisted of unit managers only. The other groups and interviews involved field staff members from each of the OSI program units. The discussions were arranged so staff within a program unit attended the same session. However, because of schedule conflicts, some staff attended a different session. A total of 31 of 44 (70%) staff and managers participated.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Talk about the roles that you/department/unit perform in working with schools or districts identified as low performing. Also, indicate the level of impact of the work.

OSI is organized into five program units: Native American Education, Planning and Professional Development, Public School Choice, Regional School Support, and Student Support Services. Staff working in these units vary in their involvement with the Regional Network Strategy and with low-performing schools and districts. Sixty-one percent of participants indicated that they spend less than one quarter of their time with the Regional Network Strategy, and 21% spend over half of their time with it. In general, representatives from the Regional School Support Team are most involved with the Regional Network Strategy, whereas individuals with the Native American Education and Public School Choice units are least involved. Some staff indicated that they provide services to all schools and districts. Their work with low-performing schools occurs because usually there is a strong link between the need for services and the schools that have been identified. At a minimum, all OSI staff members participate in the quarterly professional development sessions connected to the implementation of the Regional Network Strategy. A number of OSI staff are also involved in planning and organizing the professional development sessions.

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OSI staff have multiple roles and responsibilities. Their work has an impact on levels beyond the state level, including district, school, and network levels. All but one focus group participant reported that their work influences other levels of the system beyond that of the state. Thirty-six percent reported that their work influences districts, schools, and regional networks. Overall, OSI representatives reported less involvement with the regional networks than with districts or schools, though the amount of involvement did vary by OSI unit. The roles of OSI staff differ but those mentioned most frequently included planning, program oversight, administrative functions related to grants and contracts, analyzing data, and writing reports.

Focus group participants voiced a concern, particularly in relation to current OSI roles and responsibilities, about how the Regional Network Strategy will develop over time and what this will mean for OSI staff. Many staff acknowledged that the process of putting the Regional Network Strategy into place is a difficult one. For some, the concern is based on history and scarce resources. For others, the concern is based on the lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities. Not everyone understands how his or her program fits into the Regional Network Strategy.

Examples of responsibilities specifically related to work with low-performing schools:

- Provide oversight of the Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs), the statewide network responsible for supporting school improvement in the lowest performing schools.
- Develop interoffice coordination and building coherence with other state-level networks in regard to shared schools.
- Manage the scope of work for networks involved with the Regional Network Strategy.
- Serve as a broker/intermediary to get services into low-performing districts and schools.

Strategies and Approaches to School Improvement

- Whether or not you work directly with schools or districts, describe your department's overall approach for working with schools/districts that have been identified for improvement.

The two overarching strategies that OSI uses to work with low-performing schools and districts are the Regional Network Strategy and District Partnership Agreements. Both are based on building collaborative partnerships at the local level and establishing a comprehensive approach to meet the needs of low-performing schools and districts. The Regional Network Strategy leverages the resources and expertise of regional networks to identify appropriate services and supports for identified schools and districts. The ultimate aim is to provide a continuum of services that builds the capacity of schools and districts to increase student success. The Partnership Agreements focus on establishing relationships, building trust, and developing an agreed upon work plan with the four large urban districts (the Big Four): Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, and Yonkers. OSI staff members bring networks in these districts together with district personnel to identify the support and services needed. The written partnership agreements and performance plans are the tools OSI staff use to monitor the coordination of the networks and the implementation of plans.

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OSI supports and monitors the work across the state by assigning state liaisons to each region and to each of the Big Four urban school districts. The liaisons are intermediaries between the state and local levels; they provide oversight of the Regional Network Strategy and Partnerships Agreements. The roles of the liaisons are multifaceted and differ according to needs in their area. Besides monitoring performance plans, they also attend regional/district meetings and visit schools. Some liaisons work in school buildings with the RSSC staff, others are in schools as part of an intervention team, and others work in schools by themselves. Liaisons may be part of a team carrying out a comprehensive education plan or speak one-on-one with students. Liaisons may also communicate with schools about how grant money is spent, work with colleagues to identify the most significant causes of low student performance, and then help set priorities for what needs to be done to improve student learning.

Liaisons attend to the big picture of issues facing low-performing schools; they look at all the areas of state support to the classroom. The day-to-day operations are left to the networks. Overall, the liaisons provide support and resources to improve learning at any level where assistance is needed. They are responsible for understanding the distinct issues of each school and district and providing the necessary resources to improve teaching and learning.

As representatives of the state, the liaisons are in a position to leverage resources to support the RSSCs and their school improvement efforts. Because of their involvement at the local level, the liaisons can inform other state level offices about issues at the local level. Also, the status reports prepared by the RSSCs are used by OSI staff to track the successes of the networks as well as inform others at the state level of the involvement of the different networks. For example, OSI staff members have used the RSSC status reports to meet with VESID staff to ensure agreement at the state level on the schools to work with and to make resources available. At the state level, OSI staff work to build coherence with other state-level networks in regard to how they support and monitor schools that receive assistance from multiple networks. In other words, OSI staff attend to coordination at the state level to support coordination at the local level.

For the Regional Network Strategy, all the players have to agree on the highest priorities in working with specific schools and districts. To that end, OSI is trying to use a root cause analysis approach. This is an evidence-based approach that RSSCs use to engage the other networks, schools, and districts to define priorities and effectively address low performance. The RSSCs are charged with using this approach to coordinate the regional networks (SETRC, BETAC, etc.) and avoid overwhelming districts and schools with services. However, several participants mentioned that there has been no clear articulation of how this will work. Other regional networks provide services to all districts and schools, not just those in need of improvement. This lack of clarity has caused concern and confusion. In response, OSI is focusing at least two of the professional development sessions during 2005 on the development of protocols to clarify roles and identify common approaches for working across regions and networks.

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Purpose, Rationale, and Assumptions

- In thinking about this approach, what does it assume about change? For example, what does your approach assume schools need to change? What are the underlying assumptions about how districts, parents, and students change?

The Regional Network Strategy and Partnership Agreement use existing regional networks and resources rather than state interventions as the primary method of school improvement. Both approaches are based on the assumption that local level networks are in a good position to provide needed services. Local networks know their constituencies and their context, and hence, are in a better position to understand their needs.

In addition, both approaches build collaboration across different entities. The current strategies assume that change at the local level is about relationships and building common and coherent understanding among all involved. The aim is to break down the silos and build coherence and collaboration across agencies. OSI representatives agreed that access at the local level is based on building relationships and trust with district and building personnel, and a willingness to work together. However, they also noted that this approach and assumption about school improvement is new for OSI/SED (State Education Department). The tension created by this new approach is not unique to OSI. It is inherent in the current climate with the NCLB Act. Nationally, there is a dual emphasis on ensuring compliance and implementing research-based promising practices to support school change. In New York, OSI staff have to balance compliance issues along with building the capacities of district and school personnel to improve student achievement.

The Regional Network Strategy is an attempt to build a system that pulls together overlapping resources, specifically using the regional networks to enhance best practices and improve student achievement. The RSSCs, specifically, were designed to work at the district level and harness existing field support, such as the SETRC, BETAC, and SSS networks. However, the challenge remains to unify the different assumptions on how best to support low-performing schools. OSI representatives recognize that the regional networks use different strategies based on assumptions that are often directed by funding mandates.

SED has consistently chosen to use networks to get closer to schools and has been doing this for 25 years. However, participants acknowledged that SED has never been successful in pulling all the networks together. Some expressed frustration with the pace at which it is being done. Others noted that there is a 25-year history of networks and network turf issues to overcome.

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Leadership Interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system)

- In working with regional network organizations in the support system (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC), describe how you work together.
- Describe how you work with other departments/units within OSI to support schools and districts identified as in need of improvement.
- Describe how you work across offices with SED to support schools and districts identified as in need of improvement.

Regional Networks

At the network level, OSI staff work most closely with the RSSCs and the Student Support Services Network (SSSN). Staff members within Regional School Services have the most interactions with local networks. Their experiences are based on the relationships established within the region or district they work. Examples include: participating as a member of a school intervention team that includes representatives from RSSCs, BETAC, SEQA, adult education, etc.; attending regional leadership team meetings; attending RSSC team meetings on a monthly basis; working alone within a district; and calling on regional networks when needed. Other OSI staff mentioned that they work with RSSCs when their services are concentrated in low-performing schools. For example, often there is an overlap between schools identified for improvement and need for student support services. Several staff also mentioned that affiliation with OSI has opened up their awareness of and access to the regional networks and services available.

Many OSI staff also mentioned that they work closely with SETRC. For example, Student Support Services will work with SETRC to establish supportive learning environments to meet the needs of students with special learning requirements.

Within OSI

In general, staff members have deep respect for the task of the Assistant Commissioner to implement the Regional Network Strategy. OSI representatives expressed a common understanding of the intent of the strategy and, for the most part, believe it is a successful approach for working with low-performing schools to improve student achievement. However, other staff are less clear about the implementation of the strategy and their involvement. For example, it is not clear how the Partnership Agreements and the Regional Network Strategy fit together. There is a perception that two reporting lines have been established. As a result, liaison roles are pulled in a number of directions.

Some OSI staff members do not believe their programs fit with the strategy. Others are not clear how to roll out their programs with the Regional Network Strategy. However, staff can see that one of the benefits of the Regional Network Strategy is to increase the awareness of their programs, whereas in the past they were overlooked.

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Other concerns in relation to the Regional Network Strategy:

- Internal issues involving the coordination and scheduling of network resources (e.g., VESID, SETRC, SSSN, etc.) within NYSED as a whole. For many, it is not clear which program within OSI will be responsible for pulling these networks together to establish a continuum of services to schools and districts.
- Lack of systems to maintain regular communication within and across offices.
- Belief that the lack of clear mandates will have an impact on the success of the network; that success is possible only in regions where RSSC directors have established relationships with other regional networks.
- Overlap in content and function with other entities, such as BOCES, Staff Curriculum Development Network (SCDN), and teacher centers.

Several OSI staff members noted that the professional development sessions provide a sense of purpose, but that there remains a disconnect between the content of the session and their daily work. They want to see an overarching plan for the Regional Network Strategy with clear reporting lines and desired results. It is perceived that if roles and expectations were made clear, then program unit work plans would be changed to be more in line with the mission of OSI. Some believe there is a fear within OSI to redefine roles.

One intention of the professional development sessions has been to increase communication across offices. Staff were mixed in their reactions as to whether communication has changed. Some noted that they are now working across offices to plan, whereas some staff acknowledged that more needs to be done to improve connections across offices. There are few, if any, cross-office activities and systems designed to promote offices working together. For example, OSI has a lot of records and reports that could be useful across offices, but there is no centralized system for sharing the information.

Responses to these concerns within OSI have been:

- The provision of professional development for OSI staff alone that has attended to development of internal work plans, the definition of internal roles and responsibilities related to those work plans, and development of common concepts and language to discuss the changes taking place.
- Regular convening of an OSI priorities group that seeks to knit together work programs from each of the OSI teams.
- Inclusion of non-SED funded networks in the professional development sessions. To minimize the overlap of services, OSI has invited and supported staff from SCDN and teacher centers to participate in the quarterly sessions.

Across SED Offices

Regional School Services staff members are most likely to work across SED offices to build coherence in regard to shared schools. Most recently, staff have spent time with VESID to figure out how they will be involved with the RSSCs, particularly because of the considerable overlap between the schools targeted by VESID and the schools identified for improvement under NCLB. OSI staff are taking the lead to conduct professional development training in relation to the RSSC status reports with representatives from VESID. Since the status reports often list

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SEQA and SETRC as resources in targeted schools, OSI staff members want to ensure the availability of resources.

Participants are looking for support at the SED level. It is unclear to them that the Regional Network Strategy has buy-in from the Commissioner. Participants are strongly affected by the lack of resources in SED for school improvement and implementation of the Regional Network Strategy. There is plenty of funding for career and technical education, whereas funding is minimal for school improvement. People have left SED without being replaced, new groups have been created, and people have moved around and assumed new responsibilities.

The constant re-organization within SED affects the institutional knowledge within OSI. When people leave, files are not appropriately transferred, and there is no succession training even when there is advance notice that someone is leaving. There is the perception that positions are not filled in a timely manner and that current staff have their positions changed too frequently to provide needed stability. As a result, people are coming into positions or departments that they know nothing about and in which they have no expertise or experience.

Staff also perceive that the lack of resources prohibits them from being effective professionally. For example, restrictions on travel mean that staff are limited in connecting with their colleagues and spending time in the field observing good teaching and learning practices.

Several participants also mentioned that SED frequently requests information, often at the last minute, to address a critical issue. Staff spend the time providing the requested information or rewrite it to meet demands. However, often one issue gets tabled and is replaced by another critical issue. As a result of this constant turnover of demands, staff don't believe their work is valued.

The perceived lack of leadership at SED also affects the leadership in OSI. Although staff are keenly aware of the changes at the state level, they acknowledged that the leadership in OSI is providing a sense of purpose through the professional development sessions.

Evaluation of Impact

- If your department/unit were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your department/organization be doing, and how would it be interacting with others, that is, network organizations, within OSI, across SED?

SED leadership would embrace the Regional Network Strategy and publicly support it. OSI staff perceive a lack of support at the Commissioner level. SED has a 10-year history of decreasing staff, decreasing financial resources, and increasing responsibilities. As a result, OSI staff morale is low.

Funding streams would be straightened out. Since the Regional Network Strategy does not control funding, there are several networks (e.g., BETAC, SETRC, BOCES, etc.) and programs working at cross purposes. Some participants commented that plans and programs are supported with little consideration of how they will be rolled out. For example, not all programs are

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targeted at schools in need of improvement, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Staff often respond to contradictory demands, which can undermine the work of the networks.

Access to financial resources would be improved. The State Comptroller's office is full of roadblocks. Sometimes funding is not released in a timely manner so programs are not rolled out properly. After the funds are finally distributed there is an excess and people scramble to spend it. In the end, because the contract gets thrown together and completed in a rush, some program benefits are lost. Staff perceive that what matters most to the state is not the end product.

Effective accountability systems would be established. Accountability systems need to have defined expectations for schools, district, OSI staff, and local networks, as well as follow-through. As of now, there is the perception that identified schools give OSI their plans but no one monitors the effectiveness or the outcomes of the plans. According to participants, OSI's role is to identify plans, streamline and monitor them, and make sure the plans are effective and resources are available to make timely changes.

Participants also believe that there needs to be some level of accountability, especially in those instances where performance did not change with set goals. It is believed that a rigorous accountability system will highlight the best and most effective practices.

Sustained leadership capacity. Good leadership is needed on all levels to implement the Regional Network Strategy and to provide comprehensive support to schools and districts with varied needs. Leadership needs to keep the workload at a manageable level, recognize the limitations of the current system and staffing concerns (e.g., not enough people to do all the work, aging workforce, lack of staff replacements, lack of training for future staff, etc.) and tailor professional development so it is relevant to all programs within OSI.

Staff performance would be recognized. There is a desire for more recognition among staff for their expertise and hard work. Participants are feeling overburdened and underappreciated. They also want more opportunities to share information across offices within OSI.

Change Process

- Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work with schools and districts? If so, which ones? Give an example of how you have changed.
- Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you deliver services directly to schools or districts to include/cooperate more with other members of the support network (RSSC, SSS, BETAC, SETRC, other).

In response to the question about integrating the concepts from professional development trainings:

- 10 out of 23 participants have integrated concepts learned at the statewide meetings;
- 7 have not used any of the concepts;
- 3 were already aware of the concepts and felt validated; and
- 3 said they were at the beginning stages of using the ideas.

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Participants were most likely to incorporate ideas in relation to learning community and organizational coherence into their work. Other concepts they have used include capacity building, refining roles and responsibilities, planning systems, and integrating a focus on equity and adequacy.

Those who have not integrated the concepts mentioned that the concepts are not applicable to their work or that they have little time to apply the information.

Twenty-four participants described ways the state training has influenced their work.

- **Foster collaboration and partnerships** within networks and across networks, between regionals and statewides; helped to work in collaboration with SED staff; opportunities to work with others around the state; work with partners in the design and implementation of the professional development; identify other potential partners to work towards ensuring the excellence of our work.
- Able to **communicate better** with networks, understanding their roles and ours; using common vocabulary to develop work plans; better understanding of different perspectives; meet more often to establish protocols.
- Started to have more **in-depth conversations** with community partners to develop district plans.
- Beginning to **work backwards from results** we want to achieve and plan activities we need in order to get there.
- Greater awareness of **systems perspective** and understanding that each level of the system must have clearly articulated roles and responsibilities

Comments from participants who indicated that the state training has not influenced their work:

- The trainings have served to validate my approach.
- I appreciate the sharing but have not been shown how to start using the strategies.
- Not applicable to the work I do.
- I attend more meetings and they have made the work backlog greater now.

Appendix C: Regional Network Partner Summary Reports

Activity 1 Worksheet

As part of the focus groups, OSI participants completed the Activity 1 worksheet. The worksheet contained a list of roles and responsibilities that participants were asked to check as well as space to add other roles if not listed. Participants were also asked to indicate the level of impact of their work: state, district, school, or network. The worksheet also provided space for participants to note comments about their roles and responsibilities.

All participants indicated that they perform multiple roles. All but one person said their work has impact on several levels. Thirty-six percent checked all four levels; 18% indicated impact at the state, district, and school levels; and 11% said state, district, and network levels. Other participants marked combinations on two levels, that is, state and school, state and network, etc.

Participants are most likely to work at the state level (n=25) and least likely to work with the networks (n=14).

Identification and Discussion of Roles and Responsibilities

	Level of Impact			
	State n=25	District n=21	School n=22	Network n=14
Planning	76%	67%	64%	64%
Program review for instructional environment and instructional practices	52%	57%	55%	43%
Program oversight	64%	43%	41%	57%
Monitoring	60%	57%	46%	29%
Professional development for teachers/administrators	36%	62%	41%	57%
Professional development for staff	60%	43%	36%	64%
Writing RFPs	64%	29%	18%	36%
Research	60%	29%	32%	43%
Analyze data	72%	38%	46%	43%
Report writing	72%	38%	36%	36%
Brokering services	44%	33%	27%	50%
Administrative functions in regard to grants/contract	68%	52%	41%	29%
Carrying out requirements of accountability systems	56%	43%	32%	36%

Other: technical assistance, liaisons, web development, coordination of service groups

Appendix D: Listing of NYSED Policy Documents

Listing of NYSED Policy Document used to inform the data collection and analysis

Reports to the Members of the Board of Regents, in chronological order

Report on School Improvement Initiatives, September 3, 2003: From James A. Kadamus.

Identification of Districts in Need of Improvement and Revised Schools In Need of Improvement List, January 7, 2004: From James A. Kadamus

Strategies to Close the Gaps in Student Achievement Performance in Urban Areas of New York State, June 30, 2004: From James A. Kadamus

Strategy to Implement the Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education, December 22, 2004: From James A. Kadamus

Assessment Review and Action on Student Performance Results for the 2000 Student Cohort, January 6, 2005: From James A. Kadamus

Strategy for Improving Student Performance and the Accountability and Fiscal Integrity of School Districts, August 25, 2004: From James A. Kadamus

Additional Policy Documents and Related Information

The Role of the District Superintendent in School Reform and Improvement. Draft Document developed by the District Superintendent School Improvement, Accountability and Low-Performing School Committee, New York State, June, 2004.

Program Update for the Special Education Training and Resource Center (SETRC) Network, Memo prepared October, 2004: From Fredric DeMay

2003-2004 Strategy for Building the Capacity of Schools/Districts to Improve Student Performance, Working Draft - October 31, 2003: Author: Unknown

Design Principles for EMSC Technical Assistance Centers (TAC), January 2004: Author: Unknown

Annual Planning and Reporting Requirements Imposed on New York State School Districts and Recommended Streamlining, Document presented at April 6, 2005 NYSED Regional Professional Development Session.

New York State Accountability Plan, Accountability Peer Review Workbook, December 10, 2002 (Revised January 6, 2003).

Appendix D: Listing of NYSED Policy Documents

Appendix E: NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

Requirements of an Effective Learning Community Status of the NYSED Regional Professional Learning Community – Participant Ratings

At the end of each NYSED Regional Professional Development Session, participants have been asked to rate their perception of the entire group's progress towards becoming a professional learning community. Provided below are the ratings from the June 2004, September 2004, January 2005, and April 2005 sessions. Using the scale provided below, Participants were asked to assign a rating to the items that they think describe the present status of the NYSED regional professional learning community.

1	5				
Absent from everyone	Present in all				
Requirements of an effective learning community	June 2004	Sept 2004	Jan 2005	April 2005	Mean Difference
1. Public knowledge of who and what we are as individuals and as sub-groups.	2.69	3.17	3.15	3.33	0.64*
2. Shared understanding of the learning tasks and goals of the community.	2.81	3.04	3.18	3.29	0.48*
3. Broad awareness of individual goals and needs.	2.55	3.23	3.06	3.12	0.57*
4. Awareness of skills, knowledge and other resources available within the community.	2.76	2.93	3.14	3.11	0.35*
5. Willingness among community members to reveal themselves so that all can learn through access to each other.	2.91	3.24	3.41	3.57	0.66*
6. Concern among members for each other's growth and learning: members are curious, make suggestions, etc.	3.01	3.27	3.32	3.57	0.56*
7. Appreciation of, and the ability to seek out and use, differences and diversity.	2.84	2.66	3.04	3.19	0.35*
8. Methods for resolving conflict, and the ability to use them.	2.68	2.90	2.97	3.21	0.53*
9. Active, rather than passive learning, including questioning what is taught.	3.16	3.34	3.46	3.73	0.57*
10. A willingness among members to step in and perform needed roles and behaviors, regardless of formal position.	3.26	3.47	3.74	3.84	0.58*
11. Knowledge about how to build a plan for developing skills over time, and sharing that plan.	2.68	2.87	2.99	3.11	0.43*
12. A built in, ongoing, self-assessment and feedback system for both individuals and the community.	2.47	2.80	3.22	3.43	0.96*
13. Built in, ongoing support for each member.	2.63	3.03	3.07	3.29	0.66*
14. Numerous and diverse connections among individuals, sub-groups and the whole group.	3.11	3.14	3.42	3.66	0.55*
15. Willingness and ability among members to work in different arrangements and group sizes.	3.62	3.72	3.93	3.99	0.37*
16. Knowledge and application of the various learning styles among members.	2.82	3.01	3.01	3.25	0.43*

* Significant at .05

Appendix E: NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

Summary of Participant Feedback

January 2004 NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

The following is a synthesis of the comments and observations provided by the external facilitators (Andrew Seager, Giselle Martin-Kniep, Brett Lane, Barbara Zeno, Joe Trunk and Mary Norton) of the January 14-16 NYSED Professional Development Initiative. Our observations are based on an analysis and discussion of the feedback provided at the end of each workshop day, the notes as recorded by networks and regions over the course of the three days, and the input on knowledge, skills, and dispositions gathered from participants at the conclusion of the workshop.

Roles and Responsibilities

Overall, participants reported learning a considerable amount about the different roles and responsibilities of the networks and SED. However, additional questions about roles and responsibilities were raised stemming from the participants increased awareness of the complexity of the regional network strategy and of the different players in the system. Two specific issues came out of the feedback and notes.

- ✓ ***Communication and Coordination:*** There is still a great deal of confusion regarding the roles and responsibilities of different networks and SED. Many participants asked for a “clarification of roles”.
 - Who is responsible for coordinating the actions of all the networks and the provision of services to schools? Is it the RSSC?
 - How do we work together, in which schools and for what purpose?
- ✓ ***Monitor versus Support:*** Some of the networks and SED (especially) struggle with their dual roles as monitors/compliance and as support providers.
 - The issue of monitor vs. support remains unresolved in some networks.
 - There appears to be uncertainty within SED regarding the role and responsibilities of SED staff – particularly among those who work directly with schools in which the networks also work.

Shared Mission, Clear Focus and Common Vision

Much of the work in the January meeting was focused on developing a shared understanding of the mission of the support system. Notes from the networks and regions (completed during the three days) show that the networks have many commonalities that tie their work together. On the other hand, the discussions around capacity building illuminated the differences in how networks

Appendix E: NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

work in schools as well as the lack of a clear and shared understanding of what capacity building really means.

- ✓ ***Network Commonalities:*** Most of the networks share a common set of principles that guide their work. The central principles drawn from the feedback and notes include (a) the desire to foster and support sustainable change, (b) a focus on improving student achievement (albeit through different pathways), (c) the use of research-based practices, and (d) using and co-developing planned, strategic and purposeful efforts.
- ✓ ***Differences among Networks:*** The discussion around capacity building clarified the importance of this issue, but also led to increased confusion among the networks as well as within SED. It is clear that there are very different levels of understanding, and acceptance, of the concept of capacity building among all groups involved in the training.
 - The discussion on capacity building illuminated the “lack of clarity of language”.
 - The networks have different entry points and strategies to work with clients, as well as working at different levels of the system (individual teachers, schools and school leaders, districts, and communities).
 - Each network uses a slightly different approach, or pathway, to school improvement that may be based on different conceptions as to how to best support districts and schools.
 - There are differences in expertise and content area – this is to be expected but it was useful to recognize and identify which groups have particular areas of expertise.
- ✓ ***Desire for a Shared Purpose and Vision for working with Schools:*** A central theme that arose in the feedback provided at the end of each day was the importance of, and desire for, a shared purpose and vision among all networks and SED, including a set of common principles that could be used to guide their work across all levels. For instance, a number of participants asked “what does working in a school really mean?” There remains a lack of coherence across the system around the issue of ‘working with a school’ and what this really entails on the part of different networks and within SED.

Desired Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions

On the third day of the meeting, participants were asked to describe the knowledge, skills and dispositions that they needed to do their work to build the capacity of schools and districts in need of improvement. Participants stated that they wanted to learn more about *best practices*, *systems thinking*, *systems change*, working with individuals in schools on *capacity building* and about working with *different stakeholder groups*.

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- ✓ ***Knowledge on Best Practices:*** Participants stated that they would like to know more about what ‘best practice’ looks like in a school. On a different level, participants also stated that they would like to learn and understand the ‘best practices’ used by their colleagues. In this context, the term best practice refers to successful ways to gain entry into a school, how to affect system change at the school or district setting, and to other elements surrounding the interaction among networks and districts/schools.
- ✓ ***Systems Change and Systems Thinking:*** Related to the desire to better understand best practice was an emphasis on learning more about systems change—particularly as to what this really looks like in a school and the skills needed to facilitate system change.
- ✓ ***Engaging Different Stakeholder Groups:*** There were a high number of items having to do with working with groups and how to better involve stakeholders in the change process. Participants want skills that help them engage multiple stakeholders at the school- and district-level, including the inclusion of community groups when appropriate.
- ✓ ***Dispositions:*** Many participants felt that they needed to work on balancing their roles and responsibilities so that they could *function as equals* with individuals in schools and districts. Further, participants discussed improving their ability to maintaining positive attitudes that promote trust, collaboration and productive relationships. Finally, participants asked for assistance in modeling behaviors that promote capacity building.

Membership in Statewide System of Support

A number of participants expressed confusion about why some networks or groups were present at the workshop. Attendees questioned whether certain networks or groups were actually considered part of the support system for low-performing schools. The participation of the New York City RSSC and related networks was also confusing to a number of participants. Of particular concern was the lack of involvement of VESID and groups that provide support around special education. Much of the work of the RSSCs involves direct contact with SIG, SETRC and SEQA. The absence of some of these groups was noticed and questioned by the participants. And finally, participants welcomed the involvement of BETAC, with many individuals requesting that BETAC fully participate in future meetings.

Appendix E: NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

Summary of Participant Feedback

March 2004 NYSED Regional Professional Development Initiative

The following is a synthesis of the session notes and participant feedback provided by participants during the March 16-18 professional development initiative. Information was drawn from the following questions:

Questions Informing Program Feedback

- 1) End of Program Evaluations
 - a. In what ways did this program address the overall program outcomes?
 - b. What was the most effective component or activity in the three-day program?
 - c. What, if anything, did not work for you?
 - d. Analysis of professional development priorities.
- 2) Criteria for working with districts and schools
 - a. What criteria could we use to determine how to serve the schools and districts we serve?
 - b. How will we know if we have made a wise decision about the work we do?
 - c. What are the indicators of a poor choice?
- 3) Planning for coherence
 - a. What actions can you take as a region to support the case study school and increase its program coherence?
- 4) Reflections on regional activities
 - a. What are the two most important things we learned about school improvement and program coherence?
 - b. What will we do more of, less of, or differently based on what we have learned?

Role Definition, Collaboration and Communication

Overall, the issues and themes identified by program participants are similar to the themes identified in January. In particular, participants continue to identify the importance of *discussing, exploring, and clarifying roles* among the different networks and between SED and the networks and that having time to *plan together, collaborate and improve communications* among networks within regions is a meaningful use of workshop time. Workshop sessions that allow for role clarification, team building and planning are recognized as important and as contributing to the attainment of program outcomes. In particular, sessions that allowed for collaborative work and regional planning were mentioned as the most effective component of the three-day program.

Role Definition. Based on participant comments, there is an increased understanding of the different roles and responsibilities held by SED staff and the different networks. Having the time to present, discuss and understand the different roles held by SED and the networks was important. However, there continues to be a lack of clarity about the ‘proper’ roles and responsibilities for different networks and SED. SED staff report that they need to be more responsive to “what the field needs” and better able to provide support to the networks, but that their current roles and responsibilities are sometimes in conflict with this need. Progress around role definition has been made, but more work is needed in this area.

Collaboration and Communication. Participants valued the opportunity to meet and have structured discussions with individuals from organizations within their region as well as with individuals in other regions. Networking, sharing ideas and engaging in collaborative planning was frequently cited as contributing to a region’s ability to increase coherence around planning and strategies used in common schools. When the regions were asked to describe how they will ‘plan for coherence’, almost all regions described actions that involved working together as a

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regional team to improve communication and develop effective strategies to work collaboratively in districts and schools. Planned activities include:

- Meeting together to analyze data and identify needs in shared districts and schools
- Developing communication strategies that will involve all the networks
- Partnering with other networks to engage in strategic work in one or many schools
- Developing common protocols for supporting schools

Desired Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions

In January, workshop participants reported that they wanted to learn more about *best practices*, *systems thinking*, *systems change*, working with individuals in schools on *capacity building* and about working with *different stakeholder groups*. The comments provided during the March workshop mirror the comments made during the January workshop.

The three central areas in which participants want content and information are:

- (1) Involving stakeholders in the change process,
- (2) Modeling behaviors that promote capacity building, and
- (3) Learning ‘best practices’ that relate to the change process and building capacity.

In addition, issues such as systems thinking, balancing roles and responsibilities, and targeted best practices (e.g., in reading, math) were listed by 20 or more of the workshop participants.

The three central issues draw attention to the details involved in actually working with schools identified for improvement. The comments/questions by participants highlight these details – specifically, participants want to learn best practices from research and their colleagues around how to *gain entry* into a school, how to *effect change*, how to *motivate leaders and staff*, how to *facilitate diverse groups*, and how to “let schools know we are *working with them*, not telling them what to do”. Many of these issues are critical towards building a learning community and building capacity in identified schools. Workshop participants are asking for professional development and guidance as to how to best work with schools.

Three-Day Program – Comments on process and logistics

Participants were asked to comment on effective and ineffective elements of the workshop. Many of the effective components of the workshop (e.g., regional planning time, discussion of roles) have already been discussed.

Presentations. Participants found the presentations to be useful. In particular, the opening presentation by Jim Butterworth was cited as providing continuity and confirming that OSI intends to follow through with this initiative. The presentation also served as a good method to reestablish the vision and purpose of the professional development initiative.

Case Study Activity. Participants had mixed feelings about the case study. Some participants found it to be a useful way to have the regional groups talk about a school and how to work

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together. On the other hand, participants felt that the process used to select a case study school was not collaborative and rushed.

Socratic Seminar. The Socratic Seminar was a useful means to have individuals from different regions meet together to discuss a common issue. Most participants were positive about the use of the Socratic seminar as a method, although a few participants did not like the article and did not feel that it was a good use of time.

Information overload/lack of focus. Participants reported that there seemed to be too much information provided in too short of time and that it would have been useful to provide some of the materials ahead of time. Related to the amount of information, some participants were confused as to the connection between capacity building and coherence, as well as the connection between coherence and some of the elements presented in Kay Tom's presentation.

Participation: Some participants reported that keeping the SED staff separate was not useful and did not support collaboration. Also, there continues to be concern that key networks are not full participants in the professional development initiative.

The Education Alliance at Brown University

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB)

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